



Violence, Conflict and Discourse in Mexican Cinema (2002–2015)

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Cover illustration: Martín Escalante. Still from 'Heli' (2013), directed by Amat Escalante.

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For F.H., in memoriam

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Over the last three decades, Mexican cinema has received unparalleled critical attention, both at home and abroad. The breadth of types of films being made in the region, alongside an unprecedented success of Mexican directors winning international accolades, increasing their productivity in Hollywood, Europe and in Mexico, has not only accelerated mainstream recognition and attendance at screenings, but has also helped create a star system that has transported familiar Mexican faces onto international acting platforms. The success stories of three of Mexico's most prolific directors, Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón, who all feature in this book, is testament to the rising stardom of Mexican filmmakers and the artists who work with them. Some of these artists include award-winning cinematographers Emmanuel Lubezki and Rodrigo Prieto, producer Bertha Navarro, and actors Diego Luna, Gael García Bernal, Salma Hayek and Yalitza Aparicio, to name but a few. However, despite the challenges of a national industry that is aligned with the socioeconomic changes faced by transient government policies, cinema in Mexico remains as one of the most fundamental cultural manifestations emerging from the country. An important characteristic of the tendencies of recent filmmaking in Mexico, especially since 2000, is its exploration of important sociohistoric themes. And key to an understanding of the impetus behind Mexican filmmaking's continuous relationship with its audience, which has been seen throughout its history, is the role that cinema plays in terms of examining and representing issues of national

and international concern on the screen. Historically, cinema in Mexico has held a prime position in terms of its role in interpreting national changes, challenges and discords within its narratives. In the past, and specifically during its “golden age” (1933–1964), Mexican cinema has worked as a projector of the nation’s moral compass as well as providing idealized visions of how the system should work. Over the last thirty years, and particularly since 1968, national cinema in Mexico has worked more closely with its context of production, attempting to explore through fiction the realities facing the nation. Borrowing from Slavok Žižek’s observations that beyond “the fiction of reality, there is the reality of the fiction,” we are also able to decipher how Mexican cinema’s role has evolved within the process of imagining a nation (Žižek 2012, 4). The period that this book examines takes into account a number of events and significant years that demarcate important sociopolitical developments which have helped shape Mexican society in the early twenty-first century. The book thus begins by examining two films which explore the events of 1994, a year that set in motion a number of violent incidents with socioeconomic consequences that filtered into the 2000s, the narco crisis of 2006 to the present day, and beyond. The investigations in this book subsequently culminate with the devastating effects of enforced disappearances in Mexico, which have been on the rise since the so-called drug wars, and which continue to dominate mainstream media. Although the main focus of this book is kept firmly placed on Mexico and its filmmakers, the investigation at times will also take into account developments in the field, where we have seen the work of celebrated Mexican directors comment upon global discourses of violence, and the effect these have upon the individual and collective psyche. Furthermore, although significant discussion takes place in this book regarding the effects of the narco conflict in Mexico and its representation in cinema, it is important to stress that this book is not solely about narco violence, narco cinema or the drug wars.

Since I began writing this book almost a decade ago, many twists and turns have developed both politically and socially in Mexico. The *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) (Institutional Revolutionary Party) regained and then lost power once more (winning in the 2012 general elections, and then losing in 2018). And as this book goes to press, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (from the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (National Regeneration Movement), also known as Morena) was sworn in as president, winning a victory in the 2018 elections with 53% of the vote. Accordingly, filmmaking in Mexico has responded to these events, whether

they be the political instability of 1994 mentioned above, the presence of a guerilla uprising in the southern states of Chiapas, the increasing accusations of political corruption, warfare spilling onto Mexico's streets in a narco conflict that continues to grip the nation at the time of writing, and the increasing number of dead and disappeared in Mexico, which include among other examples of social instability, enforced disappearances, gender-related violence and feminicide. Although the topic of feminicide falls beyond the parameters of my investigations, the analyses in this study will attempt to address how cinema has responded to the most significant events in the last twenty years with a selection of films which articulate a growing concern with violence in society. Accordingly, the films analyzed in this book exemplify an ongoing discourse that addresses the impact of these instabilities and conflicts in socioeconomic terms, as well as homing in on the emotional toll they have taken on the national psyche. This book originally began as a study of cinematic output in Mexico from 2000–2014. However, as my investigations evolved, and as time went by, I noticed a pattern of representation that aligned itself with predominantly violent themes. These varied in form and scale, with some alluding to social violence by its very absence in the narrative. The films of Michel Franco, for example, are pivotal to understanding this violence that invades the domestic realm, disrupts the fabric of the “safe” middle-class environment to permeate it with a destructive, toxic stranglehold. Although an analysis of his work is beyond the scope of this book, the films of Michel Franco display an uneasiness with the discourses of violence in its many forms, the passive aggressive nature of its presence within the domestic sphere, and the violation of the female, and at times male, body. The threat of modern technology and its role in alienating and victimizing the young adult is also an important theme in his work. These manifestations of violence in society are fundamental when considering how the discourses of conflict have gripped the nation. These same observations can also be seen to dominate the representations taking place in Amat Escalante's film *Heli* (2013), which will be analyzed in Chap. 5. A contemporary of Franco, Escalante takes his viewer on a journey that dissects the effects of violence upon the individual and family dynamic. It explores the myths concerning narco-related conflict and focuses a less glamorous light on those who are implicated in and carry out violent acts on behalf of organized crime.

So why is this book about violence and its representation in Mexican cinema? The simple answer is because violence and conflict have been a

constant theme in many of the films emerging from Mexico of late and because social events of the last twenty-five years have dictated an increase in violent behavior and conflict both on the streets of urban zones and in the rural areas of the country. Violence has been on the increase as a manifestation of a growing discontent with the political system, seen in the uprisings of 1994 and the government response with the offensive of 1995 when then president Ernesto Zedillo took the decision to militarize key areas of the Lacandon jungle, which had until then hosted civilian Zapatista sympathizers and guerilla fighters in the mountains. Furthermore, as we shall see in Chap. 3, political violence was also on the increase in 1994, with several high-profile assassinations taking place that year, culminating in the outgoing president Carlos Salinas de Gortari fleeing into exile. Violence inevitably dominates the Mexican screens as the centenary celebrations unfolded in 2010, and the nation fell into widespread conflict between government forces and factions of organized crime, which began in its current form in 2006 under the presidency of Felipe Calderón. The effects of these, many would argue, have culminated in the current bloodshed on Mexican streets, with the growing sense of uncertainty, social instability and an economically precarious condition that destabilizes national security and the prospect of peace.

Thus, the year 1994 marks a watershed moment for a number of important reasons: the change in which the nation saw itself both in terms of international opinion and in respect of its self-image as a burgeoning economy and convincing political strength within the global collective. Secondly, the assault on the national economic condition, brought about as a response to the carefully constructed but misguided decision, to peg the national currency against the dollar, meant that the social and political instability of the year 1994 concluded with a devalued national currency. It seems apt, therefore, to commence our examinations in this book by observing filmic texts that shed new light on, scrutinize or represent for the first time in cinema history some of the key moments taking place in 1994, and the aftereffects of the same felt in subsequent decades. Thus, the long journey toward autonomy led by the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), a rebel group that was publicly introduced to the world stage on the first day of the year 1994, is observed in Chap. 2 of this study as a means for establishing the links between the past and the present. Crucial to an understanding of such a significant moment in history lies in the examination of two important texts emerging in the noughties that look to either

the year 1994 or the importance of guerrilla uprisings as critical in shaping present national condition, seen in Alberto Cortés' *Corazón del tiempo* (*Heart of Time*) (2009) and in Francisco Vargas' *El violín* (*The Violin*) (2006), which will be discussed and analyzed in Chap. 2. Both films pay attention to the presence of guerrilla movements in Mexico, as seen in *El violín*, and, in the case of *Corazón*, which re-imagines the everyday life of an autonomous community living under the protectorate of the EZLN. This chapter will observe not only how these selected films break previously taboo subject matters on the screen, but also how the discussions pay special attention to the type of Mexico that is being represented within the context of modern-day indigenous insurgency—a subject previously denied screen representation and thus distribution to the masses.

Chapter 3 will take a closer look at the world of Mexican politics as examined in two seminal cinematic pieces of work. In line with the analysis in Chap. 2, of key films that have scrutinized previously taboo subjects on the screen, Chap. 3 will engage with the discourses which were circulating at the time of the tumultuous political events of the year 1994, and will examine how these are articulated through the filmic medium. Extending the scrutiny of groundbreaking narratives, Chap. 3 will take into consideration two filmic texts that have redefined the way in which Mexican politics can be and is presented on the screen. The films to be examined in Chap. 3 build on previously released and perhaps more cautiously aware films, which in turn paved the way for political engagement on the screen, seen, for example, with the case of Jorge Fons' *Rojo amanecer* (*Red Dawn*) (1989) and Luis Estrada's *La ley de Herodes* (*Herod's Law*) (1999). Carlos Bolado's *Colosio: El asesinato* (*Colosio: The Assassination*) (2012) and Jorge Ramírez Suárez's *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*) (2004), which will be examined in Chap. 3, therefore, continue the dialogue with a politically informed and, in many cases, ideologically engaged audience, desirous for narratives which speak of a political reality previously obscured on the Mexican screen.

The ending of Bolado's film concludes that the assassination of the presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, in March 1994 set in motion the wave of violence experienced in subsequent years, whereby the final scenes allude to the narco wars as a culmination of the instability offset by the events of 1994. The political critiquing on the screen, therefore, takes on a new direction when applied to the scrutiny of the modern crisis of Mexico's so-called drug wars, as visualized in its recent cinema. Luis Estrada will become the focal point for my analysis in Chap. 4 when we

take into account his contribution to this debate with his film *El infierno* (*Hell*) (2010), one of the first productions to emerge in 2010 that directly assesses the Panista government's implicit role in the shaping of what has become an urban conflict of unprecedented scale. Forming part of a number of films dealing with the narco crisis, ignited in its current form in 2006 with a newly sworn-in president Felipe Calderón, *El infierno* sets the agenda for what has become an important genre in contemporary cinema: the narco film. Closely followed by Gerardo Naranjo's more serious *Miss Bala* (2011) and accompanied by Beto Gómez's *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (*Saving Private Pérez*) (2011), the latter closer to *El infierno* through its employment of satirical narrative forms, *El infierno* steers the course for further filmic examinations on a modern-day problematic that dominates national discourse. Amat Escalante's *Heli*, mentioned earlier, will take the trajectory toward another direction in Chap. 5, by observing through the neorealist lens, a socioeconomic ailment that continues to provide discursive material in national and international media circles. Chapters 4 and 5, therefore, will compare and engage with two different approaches to a shared problematic seen in Estrada's now signature satirical spin on events of national importance, set against Escalante's excruciating and dark observations on the crisis, as seen through the eyes of a young innocent victim of the current narco violence.

Violence and social discord are of course not exclusive to the Mexican national condition, and the next two chapters will acknowledge national filmmakers' examination of what constitute global issues of poverty, conflict and trauma. Chapter 6 will explore how three Mexican directors envision the effects of armed conflict and urban violence, as demonstrated in past, present and future European societies and carried out as a comparative exercise. At this point, the analysis will shift to observe these Mexican directors' individual contribution to transnational filmmaking and their influences on a world stage. My exploration will observe how Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón's visions of a dysfunctional European context, which stems from past wars, present economic sieges and future social disintegration, shape a continental dimension that is in dialogue with the filmic explorations conducted in and about Mexico. Chapter 6 will take on board recent theoretical discussions on the nature of violence and representation as explored in Guillermo del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* (*Devil's Backbone*) (2001), González Iñárritu's *Biutiful* (2010) and Cuarón's dystopian *Children of Men* (2006). The analyses will therefore examine how Mexico's most well-known directors

have set about addressing a commonality of themes and situate these in foreign territories in order to explore notions of conflict in the past, present and future European society. And by doing so, the Mexican directors, whose works are analyzed in Chap. 6, situate the discourses of violence explored in their films within a transnational context of production.

The concept of transnational filmmaking is one that will be returned to in Chap. 7, when the focus of analysis will address an intertextual and intergeneric film that by its very nature abides by the conventions of the transnational film. Through its subject matter, the film analyzed in Chap. 7 hones in on the discourses of personal trauma and grief, two themes that continue to drive the discussions with my examinations of the multidirected piece, *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (*Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer*) (2002). The implications of displacement through warfare, as shown in the figure of the Guatemalan indigenous examined in Chap. 7, are in dialogue with the same observations of refugee displacement and affected violence explored in Cuarón's film, *Children of Men*, featured in Chap. 6, and of the Chiapaneco indigenous survivors of the 1995 offensive examined in Chap. 2. Equally, the transnational dimension of *Aro Tolbukhin* speaks of a cinema that transcends physical borders, generic boundaries and national subject matters, echoing the human experience. As a film that explores the effects of a psychological trauma on the bereaved, which is brought about by the sudden loss of a loved one through violent means, the analyses in Chap. 7 will pave the way for a much-broader examination of the consequences of enforced disappearances in Mexico, as seen in Chap. 8. Addressing a problematic that continues to pervade in contemporary society, Mexico's thousands of disappeared continues to leave a scarred nation grappling with the never-ending grief cycle that is brought about through the sudden and inexplicable loss of a loved one. By examining the effects of maternal bereavement in the context of Mexico's *levantones*, with her documentary *Ausencias* (*Absences*) (2015), Tatiana Huezo attempts to highlight an epidemic that is collectively traumatizing a nation already weary from years of urban conflict and narco-related violence.

By no means exhaustive, this book will attempt to engage with a carefully selected number of films that manifest a preoccupation with the changing nature of the nation as shaped by the predominance of violent behavior, political and economic uncertainty and social discord. The book, therefore, will demarcate the changing nature of political representation on the screen alongside the development of a critical stance within the

filmic narratives previously unseen with such clarity in national filmmaking. This study is not intended, however, to provide answers but more to ask questions and address the issues that are brought forth by the narrative discourses of the films selected for analysis. The discussions in this book will address some of the problematics associated with the representation of violence, the effects of conflict and the theoretical speculations that frame the cinematic interpretations of the social condition on the screen. It will engage with how the filmmakers express their concerns regarding what is happening and has happened in their nation state and abroad. And the analyses will scrutinize the issues raised through these representations, and what they say about the types of societies that are being examined. As I wrote this book, more films continued to be released, political developments unfolded and Mexican filmmakers went on to win Academy Awards for three years in a row. As it stands, Mexican film studies continue to flourish, as filmmakers continue to make films. Whether these be in Mexico, Hollywood or Europe, Mexican filmmakers are making their mark within the industry, and have made significant leaps in terms of recognition and quality of material over the last twenty-five years of filmmaking. The generation that began making films in the 1990s, seen in del Toro, Cuarón, Estrada and others, have paved the way for a new generation of filmmakers to take the baton of representation and continue to explore their realities on the screen, seen in Escalante, Bolado and Huezo, to name but a few. This reality speaks of a nation in transition, a nation in crisis and a nation that turns to its artistic community to unravel the chaos and create meaning through representation.

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CHAPTER 2

Indigeneity, Insurgency and Resistance: *El violín* (2006) and *Corazón del tiempo* (2009)

Hay muchas realidades que no están tocadas en nuestro cine y merecen ser retratadas y reflejadas ... A mí me interesaba el tema campesino, el indígena, el México rural que no se ve en el cine. (Carrasco Araizaga 2007, 42)

There are many realities that are not touched upon in our cinema and they deserve to be reflected and represented. I was interested in the subject of the indigenous land-worker [and] a rural Mexico that is not seen in film. (Francisco Vargas, filmmaker)

The mid-1990s, leading up to the new millennium, saw dramatic changes to the nation's political landscape. The consolidation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), alongside the implementation of neoliberal economic policies spearheaded by the often-termed technocratic presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, formed the catalyst for a declaration of war made by an insurgency, which, although localized in its initial stages, went on to become an international phenomenon aligned with alter-globalization and anti-neoliberal movements across continents.

On the January 1, 1994, a date that secured a dramatic shift in the nation's political consciousness, a masked group of insurgents took the towns of Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, Altamirano, Oxchuc, Huixtán, Chanal and San Cristóbal de las Casas, located in the region of Chiapas. That same day at 7.30 pm, a spokesperson, who would become known as

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, addressed members of the national press from the steps of the Palacio Nacional in San Cristóbal. Wearing ski masks, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) burst onto the world stage to proclaim its demands, and ensured its position over the ensuing months as the focal point of national and international media speculation. Both public and press opinions oscillated between enthrallment and caution, and the interest in the EZLN's motives continued to grow throughout that same and subsequent years. The visual allure of the movement's apparent uniformity in the form of ski masks, and, most of all, the romantic assertions of a revolutionary figure who reached out to the masses through the use of the spoken and written word, fed the public's desire for an alternative political voice, within a system that was seen to have become cynical in its maneuverings and was perceived as outdated. The EZLN and its spokesperson turned to the national and international media as a platform for courting public opinion, thus securing the movement's political and ideological demands (among these the right to indigenous autonomy and self-governorship) as central to mainstream debate. During the months following the uprising of January 1994, images of Subcomandante Marcos would find their way onto various domains, from the traditional photographic depictions in the press, to replicas on miscellaneous surfaces such as postcards, t-shirts, posters, cards, fabricated dolls, pins and other such duplicated items of remembrance. The consumption of Marcos' image on a vast scale during the early years of the EZLN's relationship with the media points toward the rise in supply and demand in terms of visual replicas of rebellion experienced toward the end of the twentieth century. Despite the increasingly produced and rapidly consumed photographic images of the rebels, coupled with a growing interest on the subject matter by documentary filmmakers, fiction films, however, took more than a decade after the uprising to represent the mid-1990s indigenous insurgency in Mexico. Initially, these observations were made tentatively, using allegory as a marker of context, whereby rebel and military conflict was set in an undefined rural locality, as seen, for example, in Francisco Vargas' *El violín* (*The Violin*) released in 2006. Several years later, Mexican cinema finally tackled the mimetic interpretation of the 1994 indigenous resistance movement in Alberto Cortés' *Corazón del tiempo* (*Heart of Time*) (2009). Although subtle references to the presence of a guerrilla insurgency existed in the Mexican filmmaking of the early 2000s, seen, for example, in María Novaro's *Sin dejar huella* (*Without Limits*) (2000), which dedicates a tongue-in-cheek final scene to showing

the character of Ana posing next to her “ideal man”: a life-sized cardboard copy of Subcomandante Marcos. And later Alfonso Cuarón’s perceptive lens in *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother Too*) (2001) engages in discreet observations on the increased presence of military personnel in Mexico’s rural areas through his representation of military checkpoints en route to the destination of *la boca del cielo* (Heaven’s Mouth). In addition to these observations, Cuarón introduces the subject of indigenous rebellion to the narrative in an early reference to the protagonist Julio’s sister, Manuela, a student activist who is momentarily shown at a rally in Mexico City in aid of the indigenous resistance movement in Chiapas. These instances of recognition, moreover, act as asides to the overall narrative contents, merely serving as filmic pauses to reflect on the condition of the nation, without fully engaging with or analyzing the cultural context. The indigenous uprisings, it seems, remain on the fringes of consideration for these films. It was not until the making of *El violín*, and later *Corazón del tiempo*, however, that this thematic taboo was finally challenged and, eventually, broken.

EL VIOLÍN

Although the subject of a number of recent documentaries, the representation of indigenous resistance movements in Mexico has received little attention within the realms of fiction films until the making of *El violín*. Vargas’ *opera prima* broke with previous cinematic taboos by addressing the thorny issue of governmental oppression of indigenous communities, while placing its narrative in an undisclosed spatial location, set amid an undetermined moment in history. Notwithstanding, Vargas’ camera lens remains sharply focused on issues of military repression, indigenous displacement and the unerring spirit of resistance at the core of the film’s main characters. The focus of investigation in this chapter will address the significance of this seminal piece of contemporary cinema, alongside an analysis of *Corazón del tiempo* later on, taking into consideration their observations on the discourses of resistance, amid the socially evolving, yet paradoxically consistent, world of the indigenous subject. *El violín*’s narrative speaks of contemporary Mexico’s fragile sense of national identity, which is selective in its recognition of national subjects, wherein mainstream political representation (and therefore visibility) is determined by notions of race and class, alongside an imaginary sense of indigeneity. In these narratives, we find filmic explorations of oral traditions as agencies of

indigenous archaeology, histories and the vocality of the silenced and politicized subaltern which are framed within discourses of representation and nationhood.

At the time of its release, four years before Mexico's bicentenary celebrations, *El violín* set about scrutinizing the indigenous condition set against a context of displacement, military repression and conflict. Detailing a subject matter rarely explored in national cinema, and as observed earlier, Vargas' film represents a breakthrough in recent Mexican filmmaking for a number of reasons. To begin with, it constitutes the first fiction film to depict and critique openly the militarization of rural areas in Mexico, exploring the sense of displacement and its effects upon the indigenous communities living in the affected regions. Secondly, through its narrative the film recognizes the existence of guerrilla movements present within the Mexican sociopolitical landscape since the 1960s, a subject explored within the documentary genre, but not in fiction film.¹ And thirdly, *El violín* constitutes the first fiction film to depict military torture and brutality visually in an unflinching manner, something that nearly two decades before was difficult to come by, despite Jorge Fons' attempt in 1989 with his film *Rojo amanecer* (*Red Dawn*), a feature that contextualized the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre within the confines of a family apartment in the Chihuahua Buildings at the Plaza de Tlatelolco. Although dealing with a subject matter not before seen in fiction film, Fons' representation of military brutality was conveyed off screen, with only audio excerpts of the massacre occurring outside of the family apartment. Despite these obstacles, Fons' seminal piece paved the way for further narratives exploring governmental corruption and military repression, seen, for example, in Gabriel Retes' *El Bulto* (*The Lump*) (1991), a film that deals with the physical and psychological aftermath of a survivor from the infamous Dirty War of the 1970s. Lauro, the protagonist, awakens after a twenty-year coma, to find himself living in the midst of a society experiencing the Carlos Salinas de Gortari-instigated pre-NAFTA euphoria. However, despite these advances within the film industry both Fons' and Retes' films relied upon the use of allegory and portrayed the *halcones* or the government-instructed paramilitary group, as wearing civilian clothing, a move that was instigated because of fear of offending the Secretariat of National Defense, and the potential risk of *enlatamiento*. The process known as *enlatamiento* was commonplace until recently,² affecting films which questioned or critiqued the government and its agencies on the screen, seen, for example, in the case of Julio Bracho's *La sombra del*

caudillo (*El Caudillo's Shadow*) (1960), a film that remained *enlatado* for nearly thirty years following its depiction of *caudillismo* at play within Mexico's post-revolutionary political arenas. In 1999, the release of Luis Estrada's *La ley de Herodes* (*Herod's Law*) signaled a shift in the way political critiquing took place on the screen, and subsequently prompted a new opening in terms of the way in which filmic observations were made in relation to political corruption and social injustice. In his film, Estrada situates the narrative in the epoch of the 1940s, and employs the use of allegories in order to criticize the regime at the time of filming. Despite his reliance on metaphor, however, Estrada's *La ley de Herodes* constitutes the first film to depict party emblems and their naming openly in order to associate these with political corruption and murder. Such actions provoked a stir when the film was first released and prompted the Mexican Film Institute, IMCINE, to withdraw its partnership in the project with Bandido Films, Estrada's production company. *La ley de Herodes* was later followed by Jorge Ramírez Suarez's *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*) (2004), which will be explored later in this book. In turn, *Conejo en la luna* took the depiction of the Mexican political and diplomatic circles one step further, projecting a vision of a system corrupt to its very core, and whose powers of coercion reached beyond Mexican territories. Despite these important contributions toward a national debate concerning government corruption and the repression of its subjects, the topic of indigenous insurgency and the militarization of the rural spaces of Mexico's topography had, until recently, remained almost absent in fiction film. As mentioned earlier, the subject has received substantial attention within the confines of the documentary, seen in, for example, María del Carmen Ortiz y José Luis Contreras' *Los más pequeños: retrato del EZLN* (*The Smallest Ones: Portrait of the EZLN*) (1994), Nettie Wild's *A Place Called Chiapas* (1998), Athena Mandis' *Return to Chiapas* (2005), Benjamin Eichert, Rick Rowley and Staale Sandberg's *Zapatista—documental del EZLN* (*Zapatista—EZLN documentary*) (1999), alongside the important work of production company, Canal Seis de Julio, whose documentaries on the 1994 uprising among other campaigns and moments of social unrest have become significant visual testimonies. More recently, Gerardo Tort's *Lucio Cabañas: la guerrilla y la esperanza* (*Lucio Cabañas: Guerrilla and Hope*) (2005) explored the legacy and life of Lucio Cabañas Barrientos and his call to arms in the Sierra Madre in Atoyac, Guerrero, during the 1970s. Of equal measure, the subject of indigenous uprising has also been extensively covered within the medium of documentary photography and

photojournalism, providing an exemplary visual archive of historical events as they unraveled before the lens seen in the work of Araceli Herrera, Francisco Mata Rosas, Antonio Turok, Marco Antonio Cruz, Ángeles Torrejón and Ulises Castellanos, to name but a few. Despite these efforts, however, fiction filmmakers remained hesitant to acknowledge and represent indigenous resistance movements on the national screen, until *El violín*'s release in 2006. Once screened, the film was received favorably by critics both within national borders and beyond domestic spectatorship. It was awarded four Arieles and won festival prizes at Cannes, San Sebastian, Guadalajara and Sao Paulo, among others. Critics commended its brave nature and aesthetically accomplished photography, with filmmaker Guillermo del Toro declaring that "en *El violín* está el futuro del cine mexicano" (the future of Mexican cinema lies with *El violín*) (Bonfil 2007, 9).

Vargas' film opens with a low-angle medium shot depicting a scene of torture taking place in the interior space of a campesino's *jacal*.³ The acts of violence are being implemented by a number of armed soldiers on a group of campesinos who are huddled on the floor with their arms and legs bound together. One particular subject is tied to a chair at the forefront of the shot, with his back to the camera, and is being interrogated by a military guard. This opening scene acts as a prologue to the narrative, since the occurrences correspond with the ending of the film in a chronological timeframe. Set from a low camera angle, three soldiers with their backs to the audience are standing while the aforementioned campesinos are crouching on the floor. Although unidentifiable, the main soldier inflicting the torture is seen wiping his boots on the indigenous man tied to the chair—this action will be mirrored by the character of the Capitán (Dagoberto Gama) later in the film, who is seen wiping his boots while questioning don Plutarco (Ángel Tavira). There is no artificial light in the enclosed space, apart from a stream of sunrays penetrating the dark from the cracks in a left hand cornered window. The same soldier then stubs his cigarette out on the victim who has his back to the spectator. The filmic montage provides a second camera angle which is now lower and focuses only on the feet of the campesino who is tied to the chair. The image of the campesino's feet is offset against the military boots next to them, which fill the frame causing a visual comparison to be made and outlining the power dynamics at play in this scene. Two women can still be viewed in the background. This sequence concludes when the frustrated interrogating soldier calls the Sargento for assistance. The next scene to follow

constitutes a graphic depiction of sexual violation taking place, where we witness one woman's pained facial features occupying a large section of the cinematic frame. The camera remains static, unflinchingly capturing the moments of intense physical and mental anguish experienced by the campesina who is being subjected to sexual assault by a soldier positioned on top of her, while two remaining soldiers stand close by observing the scene. Spectators are able to continue hearing the woman's cries as the credits roll and the screen obscures to black. The aim of this stark sequence, as Niamh Thornton argues, is to provide an emotional connection between the spectator and the female victim being raped since "the silence accompanying these ellipses makes the visuals and the sounds of the shouts and screams more shocking" (Thornton 2013, 174). Thus, the camera's refusal to move (or to look away) forces the viewer both to participate as a witness in the scene and identify with the victim's distress. The *mise-en-scène* then cuts to the opening of the narrative and Plutarco's melancholic violin strings can be heard extra-diegetically. The visuals locate the scene and narrative in the *provincia*, and the characters are thus identified as rural workers. Traditionally, in Mexican cinema the countryside was a site for idyllic visualizations of a chaste location untouched by the moral evils of modernity and progress, seen in classic films such as Fernando de Fuentes' *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*Out on the Great Ranch*) (1936). Since the late 1960s and early 1970s however, the traditional representation of this cinematic site has been contested by filmmakers from the generation of 1968, who sought to reinterpret the bucolic space and its inhabitants in a much darker context, seen in films such as Felipe Cazals' *Canoa* (1975) and Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (*The Place Without Limits*) (1977). In contemporary Mexican cinema, this endeavor continues to be seen in films such as Carlos Carrera's *La mujer de Benjamín* (*Benjamin's Woman*) (1991) and later his *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Padre Amaro*) (2003). As Emily Hind notes in her article on the *provincia* in Mexican film, "provincial settings occasionally fall short of paradise. In cinematic provincia, the characters sometimes die or fail to overcome social barriers" (2004, 27), and it is exactly this social and class struggle due to the campesino's physical and spatial isolation that Vargas chooses to focus his filmic narrative on.

When we are first introduced to the protagonist, the early camera angles frame don Plutarco Hidalgo's left hand gingerly tending to his violin, alongside a view of his bandaged amputated right hand. Concurrently, we are shown a pan shot of the countryside (one repeated on several

occasions in the film) and a wide angle shot of Plutarco's home in the village named La Piedad is included in the frame. The early scenes in the narrative reveal a normal day in the life of Plutarco, his son Genaro and grandson Lucio (Mario Garibaldi), as they set off early in the morning en route to the nearest town in order to busk for a few pesos that will buy them some tacos to eat. These scenes of hardship are musically accompanied by the opening bars of a corrido that will become a recurring musical motif in *El violín*, known as the *Corrido de los Herreras*. This same corrido makes its presence both diegetically and extra-diegetically throughout the course of the narrative, aligning itself with the theme of resistance embedded in the ideological framework of the film. Firstly, the ballad will be interpreted by Plutarco on his violin, and then taught to his grandson around a campfire, only to conclude the narrative with an altered version sung by an orphaned Lucio living in destitution following the demise of his family members.

THE ELEMENT OF MUSIC

The importance of music to both the filmic narrative and its readings are paramount. Not only witnessed in the film's title, the violin forms a symbolic link between the protagonists and becomes the nucleus around which the main narrative events circumnavigate. Toward the end the same instrument will constitute the catalyst for the escalation of further violence and the eventual annihilation of its owner (Fig. 2.1).

The discovery of a violin buried in the ground, owned by Plutarco, becomes the evidence necessary to inculcate the aging musician. Plutarco is accused of assisting the rebel cause through his smuggling of ammunition out of army-appropriated territory and into the sierra and rebel hands. There are filmic references here in terms of the musical instrument as a weapon, reminiscent of Robert Rodriguez's *El mariachi* (*The Mariachi*) (1992), particularly the use of the violin case for the transportation of weaponry. Furthermore, in addition to the musical focus and title, Vargas goes so far as to describe his film itself as a corrido, thus situating the text within an important and highly identifiable national music genre (Guillen 2007). As Daniel F Chamberlain notes, in Mexico the corrido "not only survives but also continues to flourish as an important mode of fictional and historical narration" (2003, 77). Although difficult to define, and present for several centuries in Mexico while taking on various narrative guises, the corrido as a form of popular musical ballad is often associated



Fig. 2.1 Don Plutarco's violin filled with ammunition. Still from *El violín*

with themes of rebellion, resistance and marginalization. Whether the protagonists are presented in the shape of revolutionaries, early twentieth-century (benign) bandits, or more recently as romanticized outlaws pertaining to the narco conflict, the corrido provides the musical framework from where creative interpretations of historical events and mythical figures take center stage. In terms of the discourse of rebellion in the corrido, Chamberlain further notes:

The corrido, then, clearly configures distinct historical epochs and is clearly the voice of marginalized social groups. However, it is also the medium through which these epochs are assimilated into [...] the universal time of history. It is a narrative form that bridges both sides of a political border and through which the voices of marginalized groups can be heard and incorporated into a community at large. (79)

And it is the recurring *Corrido de los Herreras* in Vargas' film that acts as this narrative "bridge." The *Corrido de los Herreras* metaphorically binds the three generations of Hídalgos together, while also linking the ideological underpinnings of the ballad's discourse with those of the film's political stance, through the corrido's extra-diegetic presence during moments of repression, displacement and hardship. Thus, the *Corrido de*

los Herreras holds center place within the musical trajectory of the film, and is interpreted firstly by Plutarco, who passes on his lyrical knowledge to his grandson, and then later by Lucio (as the only remaining Hidalgo) who performs his own version to a group of despondent diners at a local restaurant. Plutarco and Lucio's interpretations of the *Corrido de los Herreras* interestingly replaces the names of "Herrera" with that of "Hidalgo," which not only constitutes the family name, but provides an inter-temporal and ideological link with insurgent predecessors from the nation's past, and in particular recalls the main players from Mexican Independence, acknowledging Miguel Hidalgo's pivotal role in the events. Indeed, the *Corrido de los Herreras* acts as a thematic connection between past and present rebellion, the lyrics of which prophesize Plutarco and his family's fate. The original ballad of the Herreras narrates a story of betrayal and assassination at the hands of the Federales, when two brothers are tricked and meet a violent death, never to return to their lands. The concluding verses from the original corrido that dictates that the Herreras "no volvieron a su tierra" prophesize precisely what happens to Lucio's mother and father and, eventually, also to his grandfather. The corrido sung by Lucio at the end of the film, however, contains one new and one altered stanza, incorporated and adapted to articulate the story of Lucio's father and grandfather, and the two Hidalgos, protagonists of the newly appropriated corrido:

Qué triste se hallan los jilgueros y cenizales
y varias aves que rodeaban en la sierra
tienen agravio y muy grandes sentimiento
porque les faltan esos señores Hidalgos

En las montañas ellos andaban luchando
por los derechos que el gobierno les negaba
con cientos de hombres y mujeres a su lado
de tantos pueblos por el tiempo olvidado.

Esos Hidalgos eran hombres de importancia
y sus honores resonaban por donde quiera
ellos bajaron a obedecer un llamado
por la justicia y no volvieron a su tierra

Lucio's adoption of the new corrido at the end of the film foretells the boy's future rebellion as he defiantly sings his own lyrics, with a fixed gaze on his indifferent dinning public. Lucio's determination to remember his fallen ones through the element of song, therefore, points toward the recognition of the corrido genre as constituting an important form of oral history. As observed earlier, the new *Corrido de los Hidalgos* in *El violín* therefore acts as a metaphorical link between the three generations of Hidalgos, which is that of grandfather handing down his skill and musical commitment to his grandson and of father providing the image of a fallen hero, thus sowing the seeds of future dissidence in the image of his son Lucio. As Chamberlain observes in his analysis of the significance of the musical genre, the corrido in this context functions as an "oral narrative" that works to "mnemonically package and pass down from generation to generation the values and the historical, as well as cultural, meaning of events" (79).

In the film's epilogue, following his fruitless performance of the corrido at the restaurant, we view Lucio heading toward the horizon and an unknown future. His small figure is framed by the camera as he walks away with his guitar and a small pistol wrapped in a plastic bag and tied by a rope slung over his shoulder. Some critics have compared this ending with that of Fons' *Rojo amanecer*, where spectators are also shown the vision of an orphaned child, who has just witnessed the massacre of his family members by (assumed) military personnel, as he walks off into an unknown future. Vargas' ending to *El violín*, however, provides a more openly politicized stance. As Guillermo Martínez Sotelo suggests:

Los niños son el futuro de un México que en *Rojo amanecer* se argumenta que se encuentra aún perdido, sin un rumbo definido; en el caso de *El violín* la juventud y el futuro que representan los dos niños que quedan al final en posesión de una pistola escuadra, es distinta. En la película de Vargas la juventud debe de buscar el cambio por medio de la fuerza, terminando la lucha que sus padres comenzaron. (2012, 59)

The children in *Rojo amanecer* represent a future Mexico that is lost and without direction. In the case of *El violín*, at the end both remaining children, are in possession of a pistol and they represent a youth and a future that is different (to *Rojo amanecer*). In Vargas' film the youth have to make change happen through the means of force, aiming to complete the fight that their fathers began.

Thus, Lucio inherits the love of music and a rebellious streak from both his grandfather and father symbolized in this scene in the image of the guitar, once belonging to his father, and in his grandfather's pistol (a donation from a sympathetic soldier earlier in the narrative). Both symbols once again serve to connect the elements of rebellion with the act of music-making. The presence of music in the film, therefore, acts as a medium for ideological transmissions conducted intergenerationally. It also serves as a vehicle for momentarily restoring moments of peace within the narrative, providing the space for dialogue and reflection between the characters of Plutarco and the Capitán. Visually, the violin in the film represents important concepts pertinent to the narrative which are concerned with notions of power and resistance, peace and humanity, but, above all, it constitutes a transferable melody-making instrument that provides soothing notes which are consumed across conflicting boundaries and appreciated by both opposing camps during the height of displacement and occupation. The military may be able to ransack and take ownership of the campesino's homes, livestock and their bodies. But they are unable, however, to possess and take away the element of music from the campesino. This idea is reinforced through the image of the violin and witnessed during the lighter scenes depicting the Capitán's solo attempts at learning to play the instrument (Fig. 2.2).



Fig. 2.2 Don Plutarco (Angel Tavira) and the Capitán (Dagoberto Gama). Film still from *El violín*

Plutarco in this instance maintains the position of power, and his violin and musical abilities become emblematic of his own sense of dignity and selfhood. Contrary to the Capitán, Plutarco is resolute, focused on his family and willing their survival, while remaining intrinsically linked to the violin and his music. The Capitán, on the other hand, stands alone in his place of command, without close family ties, and is duty bound, having to remain in the jungle despite his reservations (as he confesses to Plutarco). Both characters are united in the poverty of their upbringing and their love of music, yet are positioned on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum in relation to indigenous insurgency. Notwithstanding, the one thing the Capitán does desire and Plutarco possesses is the latter's ability to play and become engaged in the act of music-making. And it is with this last dignified stance that Plutarco chooses to reaffirm his sense of autonomy and thus brings his relationship with the Capitán to an end. Plutarco's actions and refusal to obey the Capitán's last orders restore his sense of agency in terms of the events taking place, by choosing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Plutarco's last declaration, "se acabó la música" (the music is over), brings the narrative and his own life to an end (Fig. 2.3).



Fig. 2.3 Don Plutarco in one of the final scenes of the film. Film still from *El violín*

AESTHETICS AND STYLE

The film's aesthetic alliance with realism, in order to depict the subject matter of the indigenous plight and their resistance to militarization, has been emphasized by the director's choice of employing the use of black-and-white format and the involvement of amateur actors. Seen by some as a manner of affiliating the film with the documentary genre, and by others as constituting a form of *neo-realismo mexicano*, Vargas' filming of *El violín* in black and white renders the piece with an aesthetic style that also pays homage to the filmic quality of Golden Age cinematographer, Gabriel Figueroa (Segoviano 2006, 2). In films such as Emilio Fernández's *María Candelaria* (1944) and *Una cita de amor (A Date of Love)* (1958) Figueroa's framing of remote Mexican landscapes contributed toward creating an iconized cinematic vision of the nation. Although aesthetically appealing, Vargas' vision of the rural landscape captured in black and white is far from idealistic. Instead, the images give the overall film a quality that aligns it more readily with the visual archives of Mexican documentary photography, the contents of which throughout the decade of the 1990s provided evidential material of the harsh conditions under which the campesinos lived, and the increasing militarization of the nation's rural areas. Whatever the reasons for Vargas' choice of filming, the aesthetic appeal of the film and its association with the documentary genre (both in still form and in the moving image) has captured the attention of critics and spectators alike. Furthermore, in relation to his filming methodology Vargas reflects:

Siempre quise que se tuviera la sensación de estar en una realidad documental. Por eso me esforcé en crear ambientes totalmente realistas que van más allá de la realidad de la ficción tradicional. Para conseguirlo, decidí trabajar con actores no profesionales, gente de las comunidades indígenas, apoyados por algunos actores profesionales. (2009)

I always wanted there to be a sense of documentary reality. It is for this reason that I made the effort to create totally realist environments, which go further than the type of reality from traditional fiction. In order to achieve this I decided to work with non-professional actors, and with members of the indigenous communities, in addition to relying on the support received from a number of professional actors.

What is more, Vargas has argued that his decision to shoot in black and white was consistent with his desire to provide a timeless quality to his film, and to situate the narrative in an ahistorical moment (Flores Martínez 2007, 19). Moreover Vargas insists that his intention throughout was to

provoke thought in the spectator. Vargas' main concern was that if he specified the location and characters in the film, spectators would associate pertinent events and moments in the story with those now firmly in the past, thus disassociating the narrative contents from modern-day social concerns (Carrasco Araizaga 2007, 42). As Vargas acknowledges:

Por un lado la película se refiere a situaciones conflictivas y a guerrillas que llevan al espectador a pensar en las luchas populares mexicanas [...] Por otro lado, construí la historia de forma que no hubiera un contexto espacial o temporal concreto. (Flores Martínez 2007, 19)

On the one hand the film refers to guerrillas and conflictive situations that lead the spectator to ponder on popular Mexican struggles. On the other hand I constructed a story in such a way so as to not contain a specific spatial and temporal context.

Although resisting the urge to contextualize or denote a specific location, Vargas nevertheless achieves a visual echo that resonates across historical and spatial boundaries, creating a mimetic interaction with the discourses of recent uprisings in Mexico, whether these be seen in the struggles of Lucio Cabañas and his men in Guerrero during the 1970s, or the more recent EZLN movement, politicizing indigenous rights over the last two decades. Furthermore, Vargas goes on to describe his film as a form of protest for “el México escondido” (the hidden Mexico) wherein exists the “voces ahogadas que acaban por tomar armas para hacerse oír” (drowned out voices that turn to taking up arms in order to be heard) (Flores Martínez 2007, 19). However, the once-voiceless indigenous subjects positioned on the margins of political debate are now prominently situated at the center of discourse, seen as the outcome of the EZLN's visualization of the indigenous plight, as will be explored later in this chapter. Despite Vargas' good intentions, however, some critics have pointed out that the representation of indigenous resistance in the film is at times peppered with inaccuracies (Bellinghausen 2007, 4). Commentators such as Hermann Bellinghausen have argued that the conclusive visualization of the rebel insurgency is presented erroneously, and that the film goes on to frame its subjects as victims of their own naivety, seen, for example, in Plutarco's signing of a blank piece of paper during his meeting with the Patrón (*hacendado*). In this scene, Plutarco signs the blank piece of paper despite his misgivings, and in the process potentially hands over the deeds to his lands. In his article published in *La Jornada*, Bellinghausen praises the film's subject matter and discursive attempts at tackling a previously

contentious subject in fiction film, yet notes that “La metáfora es el papel en blanco que firma el anciano [...] si así actuaran los indios, hace mucho que hubieran dejado de tener una tradición por la cual resistir” (the white paper that the old man signs is a metaphor [...] if the indigenous acted like this then they would have lost a tradition worth fight for a long time ago), observing that “Hoy es inimaginable un indígena comprometiendo su parcela en esas condiciones” (today it is unimaginable that an indigenous would compromise their land under such conditions) (Bellinghausen 2007, 4). In his statement, Bellinghausen makes an important observation in relation to the campesinos of Chiapas, where a heightened awareness of individual rights has been raised following the 1994 uprising, alongside the reestablishment of power dynamics within the context of collective indigenous thought.

However, despite Bellinghausen’s reservations regarding authenticity, and given that *El violín*’s narrative is not situated in one of the emancipated autonomous villages of southern Chiapas, it is conceivable that the desperation felt by Plutarco (which leads him to sign a blank piece of paper as a binding contract for the possession of his lands) could be felt by many living on the margins of society and in extreme poverty. In fact, the resulting effect of ex-president Carlos Salinas’ revising of Article 27 of the Constitution in 1992 was the rapid commercial trading of previously *ejido*-owned lands, with severe repercussions felt by the predominantly campesino *ejidatario* community.⁴ So in many ways Vargas’ depiction of the exploitation of campesino territory by wealthy landowners could be read in this context of neoliberalist casualties of rural poverty.

In the scene involving Plutarco’s selling of his lands, the juxtaposition of physiques caught within the frame, that is, the well-fed and slightly overweight Patrón offset against an emaciated and frail-looking Plutarco, serves to heighten the imbalance of power at play that indisputably tilts in favor of the Patrón from the outset. In this context, Plutarco has many obstacles stacked against him. For one, Plutarco’s illiteracy will, despite his initial suspicious hesitations, pave the way for the exchanging of his lands for a mule, which in turn will constitute the crucial means of transport in aid of his mission. Within this scenario of quiet dignity faced against the imminent breach of trust, a little boy bears witness to the deceiving of his family member at the hands of an unscrupulous landowner, who, following the model set by centuries of *hacendados* before him, will continue the cycle of exploitation and corruption which has sown the seed of indigenous rebellion in future generations. This notion is encapsulated in the

image of a gullible Plutarco signing a blank piece of paper, discussed earlier by Bellinghausen. Plutarco in this case is encouraged to sign over his lands as he is watched by a smiley Patrón, who is reassuring him of his trustworthiness and good business intentions. This scene also acts as an indicator of Lucio's future rebellion since the child is not entirely convinced by the Patrón, nor his words of assurance, and is witness to the loss of his inherited lands. The boy's observation of the loss of his inheritance provides the audience with a clue as to Lucio's future insurgency, confirming his father's earlier comments that he will eventually become "más cabrón que tú y yo" (braver than you or I). Encapsulated in the image of this little boy exists the hope of a better future for the campesino subject after decades of struggle, of possible future indigenous dissidence and of perhaps a better way of life lived with dignity and in peace.

CORAZÓN DEL TIEMPO (2009)

It is with this same aspiration that the 1994 Zapatista declarations were made and one that drives the ideological framework for the narrative of Alberto Cortés' *Corazón del tiempo*. Although predominantly a love story between a young campesina living in an autonomous community overseen by the Junta del Buen Gobierno (Good Government Junta) and an EZLN rebel, who is living in the Lacandon jungle, Cortés' film narrates the everyday lives of the villagers, their constant threat of military aggression and their striving for a better and self-governing form of existence. *Corazón del tiempo* is an important and interesting film within the trajectory of filmic representations of indigenous insurgency in Mexico. Firstly, a portion of its source of funding and the initial film treatment speak of a project that works in alignment with the context of its narrative, drawing from the expertise of the campesinos themselves, the Junta del Buen Gobierno and the EZLN as consultative agencies that shape the production. This approach to filmmaking in turn mimics the nature of mutual accord and collective input that characterizes the social fabric of the *caracoles* from the autonomous regions of Chiapas.⁵ Filmed on a number of locations pertaining to autonomous municipalities such as La Realidad, San José del Río, Guadalupe Tepeyac, Vicente Barrios and others, *Corazón del tiempo* from the outset aims to represent the indigenous plight and their daily lifestyles as close to a perceivable reality as fictional representation would allow. Performed by amateur actors, taking on roles akin to their own in the community, the protagonists of *Corazón*, who are members from the

caracoles themselves, interpret the roles in a manner that is both improvised and collective in its execution. Thus, the novelty value of this film lies not only in its narrative but also in the background to its production. When Cortés and his team set out to make a film about the Zapatistas, he did so in strict consultation and dialogue with the comandancia and the campesinos themselves. What Cortés found during the early stages, however, despite his script receiving the approval sought from the Junta, was that many members of the community lacked any cinematic experience which included that of spectatorship. In response, Cortés set about creating a film club, and took the element of cinema into the jungle, projecting screenings of a variety of films from Mexican cinema history such as *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, contemporary outputs, *La ley de Herodes*, to Hollywood blockbusters such as Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999). Being part of the viewing process, according to Cortés, allowed for a collective participation in the cinematic experience, from where an understanding of the production of a film could be reached.

Corazón del tiempo begins with Miguel (Leonardo Rodríguez) and his father's arrival at the village, where they have come to formally ask for Sonia's (Rocío Barrios) hand in marriage. The two men bring with them a cow as her dowry, and the head of the families gather around and exchange positive comments about their offspring. The women are excluded from this conversation but show their approval through smiles and congratulatory embraces, once the agreement has been made. At first, Sonia appears receptive to the idea of marrying Miguel, although a little perturbed by what she perceives to have been an exchange of goods being made involving herself and the aforementioned animal. This first observation, although apparently insignificant, proves to be the seed of resistance that will grow in Sonia, as will her rebellion against the arranged marriage. Equally, the animal exchanged as her dowry will reveal itself to be a nuisance to the family and the community, never quite settling into the village and causing more chaos than it is worth. Furthermore, from the very beginning of the narrative the cow acts as a recurring visual motif, reappearing during instances in the film to provide comic interludes and moments of reflection. In this sense the cow is aligned mostly with the character of Sonia and her rebellious persona, often presenting itself in situations and places where it should not be. The cow at times breaks free from its reins and satisfies its hunger by feasting on the greens harvested by the community for their own consumption. The connections between the cow and Sonia are consistent in the film, wherein the animal both

symbolizes the young woman's social and moral ties to her betrothal and acts as a reminder of Sonia's eventual rejection of the arranged marriage in favor of her own chosen partner. The story of rebellion and forbidden love, however, is trans-generational as doña Aurelia tells her granddaughter, Alicia, how she herself acted against her own father's wishes and choice of husband in favor of the man she loved, with whom she escaped into the mountains and, along with others, began to establish a new community. Sonia's rebellion, therefore, is not exclusive to the current day; rather, it is more the context of her romance with Julio (Francisco Jiménez P.), and the issues that it raises, which is of interest to the audience, and in turn reflects the changing nature of indigenous communities set within the social system of the *caracoles*.

DISSIDENCE AND DISCOURSE

Sonia first meets Julio in a chance encounter when returning home after a day working the *milpas*. They are instantly attracted to one another, and their growing regard unsettles the harmony existent among their family and comrades, and calls for negotiations between the EZLN and the community members toward the end of the narrative. However, when the community and the EZLN members finally meet to discuss the future of the lovers, once they have sworn their loyalties to one another, the discourses that take place illustrate the changing nature of not only indigenous thought, but also the reexamination of the position of women in society. Sonia and Julio represent the future, and constitute the second generation of resistance, given their young ages during the 1994 uprising. Thus, their lives have been shaped by the struggle and its aims, witnessing conflict and solidarity along the way. They are accustomed to the insurgent cause and to the military presence in their lives which they have adapted to. Julio and Sonia's generation is one that is used to rebellion, both having been raised in the autonomous and ideology-inspired environment of the Zapatista community. After Sonia and Julio's first conversation together, the *mise-en-scène* shows the cow having broken loose and eating the prohibited greens. The cow's upset stomach later in the narrative, as a consequence of eating forbidden greens from the allotment, acts as a metaphor for Sonia's own lovesickness due to her passion for an insurgent, who is off limits for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is because Sonia's engagement to Miguel makes her unavailable, and, secondly, without permission granted, Zapatista rules of conduct prohibit an insurgent's

romantic involvement with local community members. Sonia's partaking in the fulfillment of her own desires and falling in love with an insurgent make her appear to be stricken by an illness, as Alicia later observes.

The call to a meeting for all parties involved, including Julio's EZLN superior, Capitán Elena, alongside family and community members, is an interesting episode and one which provides the forum for the discussion on the progress made in the community and also acts as a means for questioning the existence of gender equality, and its application to their everyday lives. During the meeting after both sets of fathers have had their say, Capitán Elena addresses the assembly and reinforces the guidelines which stipulate that when a relationship occurs between a community member and an insurgent, the norm is for the civilian to join the armed struggle in the jungle. Sonia's questioning of the aforementioned rule, and indeed of her lack of a voice in this decision-making process, brings to the fore the pertinent issue of women's rights in the context of marriage. In this framework, Sonia defends her right to a freedom of choice. Indeed, her speech highlights the shift in attitude toward female equality within the context of the Zapatistas. There is an acknowledgment at the meeting that times are changing; a more conscious-minded younger generation, aware of its own rights, are demanding the liberty to make decisions out of their own free will, especially in relation to actions which will affect their lives forever. Sonia's speech not only proves indicative of this social advancement, but also points toward the changes in sexual politics brought about through the movement's raising of awareness of gender equality. Embedded within the First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle made in January 1994 is the Zapatista Revolutionary Women's Law, which, among others, specified women's rights to choose their own partners, and the right not to be forced into an arranged marriage (Speed et al. 2006). This aspect of the new Zapatista movement is one that fascinated Cortés when making his film, as he points out:

Desde que aparecieron los Zapatistas tenían una ley de mujeres. Es algo de lo que va cambiando dentro de la comunidad zapatista: el lugar que se da a la mujer en la sociedad, y también el que le han dado en los puestos de gobierno y mando, en el caso del EZLN, y de mando, en el caso de las juntas del buen gobierno. (Pérez 2009, 34)

Since the Zapatistas appeared they have maintained a Women's Law. It shows that the Zapatista community is changing in the space that it offers its

women in society, and in the governmental positions and power obtained, both in the EZLN and in the Good Government Juntas.

Significantly, half of the comandancia and one-third of the insurgency in the EZLN is female (Stephen 1997, 14). This marks a significant shift in both perceptions and implementations of egalitarian systems of power in relation to gender roles, and their place within and outside of the movement. As Lynn Stephen (1997) acknowledges:

The Zapatista Revolutionary Women's Law was widely discussed in Mexico outside of Chiapas and served as a way to bring indigenous women together with working class, middle class and urban intellectual women in new ways. Several well-known and charismatic women of the EZLN, such as Comandante Ramona, also provided revolutionary role models for women throughout Mexico. (14)

However, despite the initial enthusiasm for the new Revolutionary Women's Law, early optimism has been met by caution, and in some quarters criticism, for the perceived slow nature of progress made, witnessed in the challenges indigenous women continue to encounter due to centuries-old traditions within the communities, and the grievances due to the military presence near their homes. As Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (2001) observes: "[c]reating a community where Zapatista men share power within the family is a challenge that the Zapatista women have to face, along with the militarization of their region, the scarcity of food, and other difficulties of daily life" (125). The conflict between tradition and modernity, between the duty to one's family and a sense of duty to the cause is one that is played out in *Corazón del tiempo*, and personified through Sonia's own inner turmoil. Throughout the narrative we are shown images of women and men working the land, tending to their crops, making tortillas and caring for the animals. And despite the very apparent progress made in relation to gender equality, witnessed in the female insurgents and the high-profile Capitán Elena, within the civilian community, however, gender roles remain clearly defined. We see this through the everyday mundane nature of chores, divided according to female-designated tasks, which mainly revolve around the domestic realm and consist of cooking, sewing and looking after the children. And those which are considered male-designated tasks such as manual labor, the erection of electricity poles, tending to the animals and traveling outside

of the village on assignments for the benefit of the community's progress. These roles within the villages are clear and gender specific. The only place in the film where both genders merge in their labor is seen in their resistance to military presence and in the jungle with the EZLN members. So the scene set during the community assembly, where these issues of equality and freedom of choice are raised, are significant because they highlight the long journey traveled by the indigenous autonomous communities and the striving for a better way of life that continues to take place, alongside the implementation of the Women's Revolutionary Law. However, despite Sonia's initial protestations, her main concern is to ensure the continuation of the struggle, which, as she acknowledges, is of primary importance surpassing that of her own wishes and desires to be with Julio. As she points out to her friend while discussing her future options, that Julio should leave the EZLN is out of the question because "*estamos para ayudar la lucha, no para perjudicarla*" (we are here to help the cause, not to hinder it). Sonia, therefore, relinquishes her dreams of remaining in the community and of becoming a teacher and instead follows her man into the jungle to become a fighter herself, as the film's concluding scenes demonstrate. Here Sonia is framed in military uniform, with Julio in the background, reading a book on guerrilla resistance in the jungle, having joined the armed struggle. The film concludes on a positive note, having resolved the dispute between the main parties involved, and ensuring that the cause continues with the young lovers "*luchando en la guerra para acabar la guerra*" (fighting the war to end the war).

Despite the predominant story of the love between Sonia and Julio, there exists a couple of interesting subplots within the film that are aimed at providing an insight into the conflicts and challenges faced by the autonomous communities of Chiapas. The first of these is the story that narrates the events and progress made in the lead up to the installment of a new generator and an electricity pole in the village. Crucial to this is the role that Miguel holds, as the head of the workers' union and a trained electrician himself. He leads the task of transporting the equipment necessary for the construction of the pole and the installment of the generator, and lends his skills to the project that aims to provide the village with improved energy supply. Miguel's role in the love triangle involving himself, Julio and Sonia could appear to jeopardize the assignment, as Capitán Elena fears, but Miguel's dedication to the cause is consistent and without fail; he places his own wounded pride to one side for the benefit of the community. Financed by the EZLN and labored by the community

members, the electricity assignment is a symbol of the small but steady steps of advancement taking place within the infrastructure of the established *caracoles*. The difficulties the villagers face in the development of the project are exacerbated by the presence of the military, which threatens to bring to a halt any progress made, creating logistical obstacles seen in the various imposed roadside checkpoints. These are met by Miguel and his companions with verbal affirmations of indigenous rights to autonomy, and to conduct their own business without governmental interference. The electricity project, therefore, is present in the film to demonstrate the organized and collegial nature of the community members who are striving toward self-improvement and progress for their communities.

The military checkpoints that Miguel and his comrades encounter when transporting equipment for the benefit of the electricity project is an example of a much larger problematic of military presence in rural Chiapas. The conflict that arises from the imposed militarization of the jungle is one that has accompanied the EZLN movement since its initial stages, and forms an important subplot within the film that is worthy of mentioning. Cortés first encountered the Zapatistas and the communities supporting the movement during a trip made to Chiapas to film his documentary *20 y 10: El fuego y la palabra* (*20 and 10: Fire and Words*) (2003). It was during his trip to the autonomous community of La Realidad in 2000, where Cortés was able to witness firsthand the everyday hardships and the sense of hope found in the communities in their strive toward self-governing and peace. In this context, the threat of military aggression was constant; however, this reality was offset by a strong sense of political optimism brought about through the implementation of the EZLN's ideological underpinnings. As a result, *20 y 10* captured moments of anguish, such as those felt by the community of Acteal, which witnessed indiscriminate scenes of mass murder at the hands of the paramilitaries in December 1997, and the daily grievances and confrontations with the encroaching military camps, alongside moments of hope and peace, experienced by the diverse ethnic communities living in and around the Lacandon jungle. In the documentary, there are borrowed insights provided by subcomandante Marcos, as well as an explanation of his thoughts on the history of the movement, offering textual references to the book of the same name written by Gloria Muñoz Ramírez. What is interesting to note here is that *Corazón* relies upon representations found in *20 y 10* as a means of legitimizing the observations made in the fictional narrative. The moments of interaction in the film between the military and the campesinos, for

example, demonstrate a dialogic interplay between Cortes' documentary *20 y 10* and *Corazón del tiempo*. Scenes taken from the footage found in *20 y 10* are reinterpreted in *Corazón*, shaping the text within the framework of neorealism. There are precise interludes in the fictional film that reflect specific representations found in *20 y 10*. For example, in the documentary *20 y 10* we are informed that in the village of Nuevo Momón the paramilitaries attempted to seize campesino-owned lands, a fact that is reflected in the story of the community named 24 de Diciembre in *Corazón del tiempo*. In the film, Roberto (Compá Moisés) is a comunicador Zapatista, and dedicates his time to recording these and other events of conflict with his camera, aiming to make a documentary. The footage he compiles provides the viewer with a context for reading the social tensions experienced by the inhabitants of 24, and also acts as an informing device for the continuous provocation suffered by the campesinos at the hands of the military and paramilitary units. What we also encounter is the presence of a film within a film, a self-conscious metanarrative technique that reminds the viewer of the element of mimicry and self-reflexivity at play within the discourses of the film's narrative ethos. Furthermore, in *Corazón* we witness a form of camera face-off, of competing and challenging lenses pertaining to the patrolling soldiers recording whatever they encounter on their journey, and the aggrieved campesinos and Roberto, who in return film the passing squadron and paramilitaries. Both parties stand face to face filming one another, their cameras here, to use Susan Sontag's observations, very much taking on the role of weapons. The mise-en-scène then swaps between images of low-intensity warfare and the potential military aggression, to calm ripples on the surface of a stream where the character of Alicia has gone to seek refuge. Once again, the image of the runaway cow disturbs the scene, and the animal is framed blocking the way of the military vehicles, causing commotion and forcing a group of young women, which include Sonia, to tend to the animal's rescue and move it out of harm's way.

From the outset of the narrative, the soldiers in *Corazón del tiempo* are shown as menacing reminders of possible dangers, and we see this specifically in the scenes involving Alicia. During one episode, where Alicia is by the river and joined by her sister Sonia, the two girls remain hidden by the water, away from the sight of a passing military patrol. The soldiers during this scene are shown walking through the mists of the jungle, and, in the next scene, treading on the campesino's harvested corn. Once more, this image constitutes a direct replica of a similar scene found in *20 y 10*, which

contains footage of soldiers destroying campesino crops as they march through the *milpas* during one of their operations. Equally, there are a group of protesting Tojolabal women in *20 y 10* who are framed turning their backs on a number of passing tanks behind them, an action which is replicated by Sonia and Alicia in *Corazón* during an instance of passing military tanks on the road. Such moments of filmic interaction provide *Corazón* with a multilayered structure, constituting a palimpsest of visual narratives that are linked intergenerically and intertextually. Voices are borrowed from real testimonies given in *20 y 10* and are incorporated into the oral histories of the characters in *Corazón*. Witness accounts of displacement, violence and rebellion are recorded by Cortés' camera in his documentary and then find representative space within the fictional domain of his *Corazón del tiempo*. Together they form a visualized construction of a reality that predominates today not only in Chiapas, but is consistent with the theme of rebellion in a number of rural areas of Mexico and continues to dominate public debate and shape the indigenous plight for autonomy.

Although both films examined in this chapter prevail in terms of their respective portrayals of a common theme, such as those concerned with indigenous displacement and exploitation shown in *El violín*, or the rebellion and establishment of autonomy as witnessed in *Corazón del tiempo*, there remains a significant need for further filmic explorations of this important episode in recent Mexican history. That such a representative vacuum exists, in terms of a lack of screenings of pertinent sociopolitical narratives, throws into question the meaning and role of cinema in a modern context in Mexico. Both Vargas and Cortés have highlighted the need for a debate and filmic dialogue regarding the last thirty years of resistance in Mexico, taking into account the cases of Guerrero and Chiapas as symbolic of such a need for change. That such few fiction films exist which address the indigenous struggle for autonomy highlights the problematic of an industry still hesitant to address these important issues. As the next chapter will explore, the road toward political representation or the representation of politics on the screen began a little earlier than those exploring the theme of insurgency on the screen. In a similar vein however, the trajectory of political representation on the screen has been a lengthy one and it has also been littered with obstacles. The resulting effect, following a decade of novelty and taboo-breaking films, is that contemporary directors in Mexico are slowly reaping the rewards. What we have now is the gradual emergence of a politically engaged and critically active cinema in Mexico, ready to take risks and venture onto previously uncharted filmic territory.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Gerardo Tort's *Lucio Cabañas: La Guerrilla y la Esperanza* (2006).
2. At the time of writing this chapter, Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) had yet to be released. In his third Spanish-speaking film, Cuarón's observation on the presence and training of the *balcones* in Mexico during the early 1970s forms an important part of the film's reflection on the political climate of the nation following the Tlatelolco massacre.
3. A *jacal* is a common form of housing in Mexican rural communities, and consists of a hut with a thatched roof and walls made of upright poles or sticks covered and chinked with mud or clay.
4. An *ejido* is an area of communally owned land which is used for agricultural purposes. The community members or *ejidatarios* individually farm designated parcels and collectively maintain the communal holdings.
5. The *caracoles* (conch shells) came into effect in 2003 and consist of autonomous communities served by the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Juntas), constituting the pragmatic interplay between Zapatista political discourse and regional administration. The formation of the *caracoles* was a landmark within the trajectory of self-governorship in Chiapas, of which initial discussions began during the *Acuerdos de San Andrés* (San Andrés Accords) in 1996. These, however, although signed as part of a peace agreement, remained unimplemented due to a collapse in the negotiations process, and a discontinued commitment on behalf of Ernesto Zedillo's government. In 2000, dialogues between the Mexican government and the EZLN resumed after the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) took over the reins of power following a historic election defeat of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which brought an end to the party's seventy-one-year rule, paving the way for a number of historic developments in the EZLN's recent history.

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CHAPTER 3

Political Violence: The Case of *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*) (2004) and *Colosio: El asesinato* (*Colosio: The Assassination*) (2012)

Lo que queremos con la cinta es rescatar esa memoria histórica que a veces hace mucha falta para ver dónde estamos y hacia dónde vamos.
(Bolado 2012, 18)

Our intention with the film was to rescue a sense of historical memory, which at times is needed so as to enable us to see where we are presently, and towards where we are heading. (Carlos Bolado, filmmaker)

In the previous chapter, the focus of investigation was targeted at the events of the year 1994 in Mexico in relation to the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*'s (EZLN's) declaration of war made against the government, and the movement's entrance into the public imaginary and national discourse. This chapter will continue to examine this moment in recent Mexican history and will cast our observations toward other equally critical events occurring during that pinnacle year, which saw a dramatic change in the way the nation viewed the Salinas and subsequent *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) governments. Here public opinion altered from being swayed into a sense of false security driven by the dictums of neoliberal policies which were aimed at convincing the world, and Mexico, that it was ready to take on the challenge of a significant new trade agreement with two of its northern neighbors, to a state of shock and fear of a society spiraling into further violence and an economic downturn with repercussions for

years to follow. The events of 1994 marked significant changes to the trajectory of Mexican political history and witnessed immediate socioeconomic and political impacts on the nation's sense of stability. In addition to the emergence of a masked rebellion in the southern regions of Chiapas, as examined in Chap. 2, two months after the declaration of war made by the Zapatista insurgents, Mexico witnessed the first act of magnicide in the then sixty-five years of the PRI's history.¹

On March 23, 1994, while at a scheduled rally held in the neighborhood of Lomas Taurinas in Tijuana, the presidential candidate for the PRI, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was shot at close range in the head and in the abdomen, as he was surrounded by a crowd of supporters. Colosio later died from his injuries in hospital. The Colosio case has puzzled and fascinated public opinion since the events of March 23, and the impact it caused upon perceptions of the PRI and the Mexican political system has prevailed despite the ensuing years, and continues to cause concern and fuel conspiracy theories in relation to the possible motives for the candidate's assassination. Speculation concerning other possible culprits, aside from the arrested gunman named Mario Aburto Martínez, has inspired investigative analyses, reports, books, press coverage, public and televised debates, documentaries, and later a fiction film by Carlos Bolado, released three weeks prior to the 2012 presidential elections. At the time of the film's release, opinion polls predicted a PRI return to Los Pinos after a twelve-year absence from power due to the *Partido de Acción Nacional's* (PAN's) landslide victory in 2000. The conspiracy theories and subsequent details of the various investigations following the event, too extensive to elaborate on in detail in this chapter, navigate a myriad of possibilities concerning the masterminding of the assassination, inculcating varying sectors of Mexican society, from disgruntled PRI officials, to the intervention of rivaling cartels intent on obstructing Colosio's ascension to the presidency, to incriminating suggestions that point toward the culpability of the upper echelons of the nation's political elite. Four Special Fiscal reports later, the official conclusion remains that the assassin Mario Aburto acted alone and was the intellectual and material author of the crime. Public perception, however, remains unconvinced, and the demand for clarification concerning the unexplored investigative leads, discarded witness statements, a corrupted scene of the crime and the public denouncement of key figures accused of involvement in the event, voiced by prominent personnel within the PGR (Procuraduría General de la República) (and former PRI representatives), all point toward unresolved issues pertinent to a sense of closure.

This chapter will analyze the Colosio case as it is interpreted in Carlos Bolado's film and will contextualize the dominant discourses that frame the narrative. Furthermore, my analyses will pair Bolado's film with another filmic attempt at critiquing the political system on the screen, seen in Jorge Ramírez Suárez's *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*) (2004), also explored in this chapter. In its narrative, Ramírez Suárez's film acknowledges the assassination of a high-profile politician and directs criticisms of localized and international political corruption throughout. Furthermore, *Conejo en la luna* constitutes one of the first feature films to embark on a serious denunciation of corruption within the PRI itself, in a way that maps characters and aligns them with real-life politicians.

As explored in the previous chapter, historically, the act of political critiquing in national cinema remained one that relied upon notions of allusion and metaphor, steering clear of direct references to political parties through their respective names, and instead providing discreet yet crucial observations on the state of national politics. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2014) asserts, the role of cinema is such that its function "within a nation and its civil society resides in its role in shaping and reshaping the discursive and visual boundaries of political discourse"(106). And in the case of Mexican national cinema, political observations within film narratives remained at the fore, but were, however, executed with caution. Filmmakers had to tread a fine line so as to avoid censorship or what was commonly known in the industry as *enlatamiento*, which was a type of indefinite shelving of a film project. Historically, productions such as Julio Bracho's *La sombra del caudillo* (*El Caudillo's Shadow*) (1960), Felipe Cazals' *Canoa* (1975) and Jorge Fons' *Rojo amanecer* (*Red Dawn*) (1989) constitute examples of the tendency to work within the confines of self-censorship existent at the time of the films' making. In the case of Julio Bracho's *La sombra*, for example, this film remains an example of the *enlatamiento* process as it was made unavailable for public viewing for over thirty years due to its critiquing of national politics at the time of its making. The screening of *Rojo amanecer* during Salinas' *sexenio* in 1989, on the other hand, provides an example of the PRI's tactical aim of attempting to distance itself from past modes of governing. Through its allowance of a screening of the film, and thus a visualization of a historical moment which had until that point vilified the old-style PRI in the eyes of the population, the Salinas government attempted to redefine itself as an open and democratic ruling class. This paved the way for further explorations of politics on the screen in Mexico. At the turn of the century, and on the cusp of a change in

national politics, Luis Estrada's *La ley de Herodes* (1999) altered the way political representation took place on the Mexican screen by addressing party names, emblems, policies and key figures head on. The result saw the creation of a forum for social critiquing via the medium of satire on the screen. Both *Conejo* and *Colosio*, although dealing with varying subject matters as a focus for their narratives, nevertheless situate their stories within the context of violence, coercion and government corruption. In this chapter, both films will be analyzed in terms of their on-screen denunciations of a political party that had governed uninterruptedly for seventy-one years, working within a framework of autocratic rule and impunity.

CONEJO EN LA LUNA

Conejo en la luna is a fictional film within the political thriller genre whose narrative details the brutality, corruption and perversion of justice conducted by government officials and the police force. Its sources of funding, location and filming are transnational in style and the narrative accusations of political mishaps reach beyond Mexican boundaries and across the Atlantic onto European turf.² Government officials, whether Mexican, British or Swiss, are portrayed as ruthless, ambitious and morally corrupt. Politics as a vocation is entered into with the sole purpose of self-gratification, the acquisition of power and the accumulation of personal wealth. The story follows the trajectory of a Mexican-British couple, who, through circumstance and chance acquaintances, find themselves embroiled in the midst of an international scandal involving political assassinations, money laundering, kidnap and exile. The film narrates the tale of Antonio Santos (Bruno Bichir) and his wife Julie (Lorraine Pilkington), who have a child together, and through mutual friends attempt to buy a portion of land that has just become available, on which they hope to build a family home. This transaction, however, takes them on a journey that involves the couple becoming unwittingly associated with the assassination of a prominent political figure, and then subsequently thrust into a web of lies and deceit, which sees an end to their domestic stability. Antonio is framed for the murder, and stands accused of masterminding the assassination of the chief of the Ministry of the Economy. The accusations made against Antonio, brought about through false witness statements provided under duress, condemn the protagonist to a self-imposed exile where he escapes to London in order to safeguard his life and that of his family. Julie, however, is detained by a secret police squad and taken to

an underground dungeon where she is held illegally by the *Subprocuraduría* and subjected to psychological torture. The themes of violence, police and governmental corruption, and the miscarriages of justice run throughout the film, and it is during the scenes depicting open conspiracies and extortion that the film's strength remains. Although not always convincing, nor polished in its final cut, Ramírez Suárez's *Conejo* is an important contribution to national filmmaking because, despite its faults, the film nevertheless targets its political criticisms of the Mexican system in an open manner. Representatives of the police, judiciary and government are framed conducting their business and are open to scrutiny. This fact in itself requires that critical attention be paid to the film given its own contribution toward the trajectory of political representation on the screen. Although failing to vocalize names and political parties, the film insinuates several real-life events and people with succinct details of corruption, without, however, naming specific moments in history. For some, the lack of concrete reference to historical figures undermines the criticisms being made (Alvarado 2004, 2). However, Ramírez Suárez defends his choice stating that the narrative of the film:

Está inspirado en todos los políticos mexicanos que nos han nutrido de porquerías, desde Venustiano Carranza hasta nuestros días. Es una crítica dirigida a todos los políticos corruptos y no a sus partidos, obviamente el que tiene más experiencia con políticos corruptos fue el gobierno del PRI. (Flores 2004, 1)

Is inspired by all those Mexican politicians who have fed us trash, from the likes of Venustiano Carranza up to the present day. [The film] is a criticism directed at all corrupt politicians, and not at their parties, although the one that has the most experience of corrupt politicians is the PRI government.

Mexican audiences however, will recognize references to events that took place in 1994 and the scandalous revelations that persevered long after the Salinas *sexenio* was over, as film critic Gustavo García (2004) notes:

El guión de Ramírez-Suarez es una inmersión en la pudrición política mexicana donde se pueden identificar sobre todo los personajes y los modos del priismo de los noventa (ahí resuenan los asesinatos de Ruiz Massieu y de Colosio, las aventuras financieras de Raúl Salinas, los modos gansteriles de los viejos secretarios de Gobernación) más una presencia zumbona de los medios de comunicación como agentes que exacerban la grilla e histerizan a los actores del drama. (2)

Ramírez-Suárez's script is an immersion into a Mexican political state that is rotten, where it is possible to identify all of the characters and modes stemming from the PRI of the nineties. There are resonances with the assassinations of Ruiz Massieu and Colosio, the financial adventures of Raúl Salinas, the gangster-like manner of the old government secretaries, in addition to a mocking presentation of the media as agent who exacerbate the intrigue and frame the main players of the drama with hysteria.

These key moments in the film merit critical analysis for their portrayal of political corruption dominant during the 1990s, the memories of which influenced the way the nation voted during the 2000 elections. The first of these depictions involves the character of Dr. Parras (Ricardo Blume), chief of the Ministry of the Economy, once Secretary of the Interior, and a hopeful candidate for the governorship of Tamaulipas. The scenes involving Dr. Parras point toward the scandals that were associated with the governing PRI in the mid- to late 1990s. Just before his assassination in the middle of a centrally located street in Mexico City, Dr. Parras shares a scene with the interior minister, Secretary Segura (Adalberto Parra), and the head of the party, Licenciado Nicolás López (Álvaro Guerrero). The men are discussing the doctor's forthcoming promotion as candidate for governorship of Tamaulipas. In this scene, Ramírez Suárez offers an insight into the illegal business deals that allegedly take place behind closed doors within the inner circles of the party, and outlines an ideological binary embodied in the doctor set against the two less scrupulous politicians. In this scene, an interpretation of the old party doctrine, maintained by those known as the *dinosaurios* (dinosaurs) in the PRI, is offset against the opinions of the technocratic, ruthlessly ambitious younger generation of politicians (favored during the Salinas *sexenio*). A heated discussion ensues, and the doctor is infuriated by the request for him to toe the line. His insistence on receiving a profitable cut from illegal proceeds, in exchange for his turning a blind eye to the covert dealings of an organization known as "the Agudos," is rejected by the other two members of the party. All funds must be transported to the United Kingdom, the secretary announces, pointing toward the processing of money laundering that is observed in both *Conejo* and *Colosio*. In this scene, where negotiations are conducted over glasses of whiskey and a game of pool, the three politicians clash in their opinions. The doctor refuses to be seen fraternizing in public with the Agudos, since they are widely regarded in the media as members of organized crime, yet despite this, the doctor insists on receiving a profit

from his involvement in the deal. His outburst that matters should be conducted “con estilo” (with style) like in the old days, and that extra money ought to be made, but not just through trading with organized crime, demarcates the changing nature of political corruption over the last two decades in Mexico. Since the end of Salinas’ *sexenio*, accusations of illegal business deals which involved powerful cartels and the political elite were rife following the arrest, and subsequent charge of the ex-President’s brother, Raúl, and the disclosure of his money laundering activities that involved a multimillion-dollar fortune which was transferred to US and Swiss bank accounts. Furthermore, Raúl Salinas, also known in the media as the “uncomfortable brother,” was convicted of masterminding the assassination of his ex-brother-in-law and president of the party, Francisco Ruiz Massieu, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Amid these accusations existed the suspicion that Raúl had been involved in illicit dealings with organized crime, the outcomes of which saw large quantities of assets deposited into foreign trust funds abroad. In his analysis of the events of 1994, investigative journalist and author Andrés Oppenheimer (1996) notes:

A principios de los noventa, el gobierno—quizás a través del hermano del presidente, Raúl Salinas—había hecho un acuerdo explícito o tácito con los jefes de los cárteles mexicanos de la droga por el cual se les permitiría operar ciertos corredores aéreos para transportar drogas a Estados Unidos a cambio de que mantuvieran un bajo perfil, sin exceder los niveles “tolerables” de contrabando de cocaína, y depositaran la mayor parte de sus ganancias en México. (312)

In the early 1990s the government—perhaps through the president’s brother, Raúl Salinas—had entered an explicit or subtle agreement with Mexican cartel leaders, which allowed for these to operate certain aerial routes with the aim of transporting drugs into the US. In exchange they were to maintain a low profile, not to exceed ‘tolerable’ levels of smuggled cocaine, and to deposit most of their earnings in Mexico.

To add credence to these suspicions, in an interview conducted in February 2009 with Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui, ex-president Miguel de la Madrid accused his protégé, Carlos Salinas, and his “uncomfortable brother” Raúl, of misappropriating resources from the national treasury and conducting business with the cartels. In relation to Carlos, de la Madrid states that the former president had condoned “una gran corrupción de parte de su familia, sobre todo de su hermano [...] Permitió

que Raúl y Enrique³ consiguieran de manera indebida contratos de licitación” (a large scale corruption on behalf of his family, mostly involving his brother [...]) He had inappropriately allowed Raúl and Enrique to acquire contracts without tender) (Aristegui 2013). When prompted further, de la Madrid recalls that Raúl “[c]onsegua contratos del gobierno, se comunicaba con los narco-traficantes [...] los que le dieron el dinero para llevárselo a Suiza” (had secured government contracts, and was in contact with drug-dealers [...] who had given him funds to take to Switzerland) (Aristegui 2013). The media reacted with widespread criticism since these revelations provided further evidence of what had already been suspected was taking place within the corridors of power. However, the Salinas family fought back with a letter penned by Carlos himself addressed to Aristegui in which he expresses his “pain and indignation” at the accusations being made, stressing the lack of substantial evidence to support the allegations made against his brothers, and highlighting the fragile nature of de la Madrid’s health at the time of the interview. These same concerns for the ex-president’s state of health were mirrored in a declaration made by de la Madrid’s family, who reiterated the elder statesmen’s ailing condition. De la Madrid himself later withdrew his claims admitting to ill health and the tendency to become confused when being questioned. In response, Aristegui made public all documentation related to the interview, alongside the letter sent to her by Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In subsequent conversations with the media, Aristegui stood by her interview, assuring that de la Madrid had appeared lucid, charming and in control of his faculties during the entire hour-long interview (Villamil 2011).

To the present day, Raúl Salinas has denied all claims made against him, and in total served ten years of his fifty-year prison sentence for the crimes of homicide, embezzlement, tax fraud and money laundering. Furthermore, in August 2013 a federal judge exonerated Raúl Salinas of his crimes, coinciding with the return of a new PRI government under the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto. This action marked a significant twist to the drama of the Salinas family, and led to criticism from many sectors of society. The exoneration, in the eyes of analysts, altered Raúl Salinas’ public status from being a symbol of political corruption, to a representation of impunity (Villamil 2013a). In an interview with *Proceso* magazine, essayist and historian Lorenzo Meyer recognizes that:

Hay solidaridad en la impudicia de una clase política que fracasa una y otra vez en su cometido fundamental que debe ser el bienestar del país, pero a ellos les va muy bien. Se han montado en una tendencia que es histórica en México: la incompetencia de la clase política y su impunidad. (Villamil 2013b)

There's solidarity in the shamelessness of a political class that fails time and again in its fundamental commitment, which should be the welfare of the country, but things go well for them. They have benefited from a tendency that is historical in Mexico: the incompetence of the political class and its impunity.

Returning to our discussions on *Conejo en la luna*, the second connection with real-life events occurs when Dr. Parras, following his resignation as head of the Ministry of the Economy, and via a plugged journalist, announces his candidacy for governorship of Tamaulipas. As he leaves the conference, the doctor is assassinated while he sat in the driving seat of his car, surrounded by members of the media photographing the incident. The doctor is shot at close range and dies of the bullet wound that pierces the left side of his neck, in a manner reminiscent of the assassination of Ruiz Massieu, in late 1994. In the film the doctor's lone assassin makes for a quick escape but stumbles and is detained by security agents.

On the morning of September 28, 1994, president of the party, and brother-in-law to President Salinas de Gortari, Francisco Ruiz Massieu, exited the downtown hotel named Casa Blanca following a breakfast meeting held earlier that morning. As the politician accommodated himself in the driver's seat, a gunman approached him on a motorbike and shot him point blank, leaving the victim fatally injured. The killer then escaped and left Ruiz Massieu hemorrhaging in his car. Despite medical efforts later in hospital, he died at 10.30 am that same morning. Constituting one of the most high-profile assassinations of 1994, the Ruiz Massieu scandal was one of the many scandals that dominated the tumultuous last twelve months of Carlos Salinas' presidency, which became marked by political instability and violence (Puig 2012). Ruiz Massieu's assassin was later identified as Daniel Aguilar Treviño, a twenty-eight-year-old *sicario* who confessed to having acted alone. Following the assassination, Carlos Salinas appointed Mario Ruiz Massieu, the younger brother of the victim, to oversee the investigation into the murder of Francisco. In less than two months Mario resigned his post in protest at the alleged corruption and the obstruction of justice into his brother's case. Shortly after, however, Mario fled Mexico only to be arrested in New Jersey for having

\$45,000 undeclared dollars in his possession while trying to enter the United States. Mario was later accused of the felony of money laundering, given the evidence of large sums of capital deposited under his name in various bank accounts around Texas. Mario Ruiz Massieu was found dead on September 15, 1999, in an apartment in New Jersey, having left two suicide notes, one of which publicly accused the then president, Ernesto Zedillo, of being inadvertently culpable for his death (Aznarez 1999). At the time of his demise, Mario was due to face trial in New Jersey for money laundering and conducting negotiations with organized crime (Golden 1995).

In *Conejo en la luna*, the lone assassin who shoots the doctor is supposed to be eliminated himself by a sniper located in the building opposite the incident taking place. However, the sniper fails to aim accurately at his target, and the doctor's assassin is arrested before the destined bullet reaches its objective. This same killer, who later confesses under duress to the crime committed, will also claim sole authorship of the killing, creating clear parallels with the assassination of Ruiz Massieu discussed above. Later on in the narrative the accused assassin publicly announces a cover-up and claims to have carried out orders received from the party. This declaration sets in motion a desperate race for control implicating senior levels of the political hierarchy who are in search of a scapegoat that takes the form of Antonio in the film. What follows is an international game of cat and mouse involving Interpol, MI-5, and the Mexican *Subprocuraduría* alongside corrupt political figures associated with the crime. The second half of the film, located in the United Kingdom, is perhaps the weakest section in terms of the acting and the narrative threads which loosely begin to unravel. However, it is during the scenes in London, where the newly appointed Mexican ambassador to London discusses the transferring of monetary funds into Swiss and British bank accounts, that the film points toward the scandal involving the Salinas brothers, as outlined above. During these scenes, Ambassador López meets with exclusive hedge funders and senior-ranking government officials from the Ministry of Defense. These members recognize the existence of offshore accounts used by the government for the purpose of bribing politicians from the Middle East. During these scenes Ramírez Suárez aims to highlight the widespread nature of international money laundering and coercion inherent in varying political systems across the globe. He inculcates the British, Swiss, North American and Mexican governments as implicit players in an

international network of corruption and mutually profitable financial transactions through illegal trading.

Despite these staunch criticisms made in the film, observers in the industry, such as Hector Bonilla, have highlighted the fact that notwithstanding the indexical nature of the accusations taking place in the film, the lack of direct references to real names or political parties undermines the criticisms being made, relegating the notion to simply fiction (Alvarado 2004). As Bonilla, who also starred in *Rojo amanecer* cautions:

Lo que pudiera ser un peligro para la película es que cuando abor das ficción y mencionas hechos reales se queda un poco en el aire la denuncia porque dices: ¡ah, claro, es ficción! Es decir no está personalizada. La repercusión en el sentido político se minimiza con esta vaguedad. (Alvarado 2004)

One of the risks for the film [*Conejo en la luna*] is that when fiction mentions real events it is possible that denouncements remain up in the air because one can say: ah well, its fiction! In other words, it is not personalized. And political repercussions remain minimal because of such vagueness.

Bonilla's claims that the loss of value attributed toward a work of fiction, in terms of its relationship with reality, ring true to a certain extent, and in the context of Mexico post-1994, have reception implications for the film. In a society anxious for the truth, subjected to reports that confirm an array of illegal dealings at the hands of middle- and senior-ranking politicians, and against the seeming impunity enjoyed by many in power, the desire for fact over fiction holds precedence. Perhaps on the back of this desire to portray history working within a mimetic framework, Carlos Bolado molds his filmic script on the events of 1994 focusing on the notion of historical truth, although acknowledging the creative licence awarded through fiction in order to represent a polemic moment from the recent past. The tension between fiction and reality, furthermore, is one that is appropriated as a narrative tool in Bolado's *Colosio: El asesinato*, analyzed below, in an attempt to fill historical gaps and address unanswered questions. Thus, the context of fiction becomes the platform for the articulation of one of the most critical interpretations of Mexican politics seen on the national screen, and, with the film's release, one of the final thematic taboos was conclusively broken.⁴

COLOSIO: EL ASESINATO

Colosio: El asesinato was released less than four weeks prior to the 2012 presidential elections in Mexico, where the PRI was positioned as leading in the opinion polls. At the time of its release, critics praised the film's bold depiction of the events surrounding the assassination of the presidential candidate in 1994, and some speculated as to whether the film's contents would influence voting behavior on July 1, 2012 (Aviña 2012, 4; Jordán 2012, 11; Calderón 2012a, 7). In response to these queries, Bolado outlined his desire to raise awareness of this key moment in history, and to encourage debate regarding this and other important moments in the nation's recent past. Bolado's representation of that pivotal moment in recent Mexican political history is driven by a preoccupation not to forget the events of 1994, but, perhaps more significantly, not to restore the PRI to power (Vértiz de la Fuente 2012, 72; Camarena 2012, 7). The significance of 1994 for subsequent political developments in Mexico is stressed in the opening credits of the film, where Bolado's insertion of a quotation by Lenin, "Hay décadas en las que no pasa nada, y semanas en las que pasan décadas" (There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen), makes reference to the turbulent nature of that same year (Fig. 3.1).

The film *Colosio* focuses on a fictional top-secret investigation funded by the government into the murder of the presidential candidate. Heading the special investigation is military intelligence officer Capitán Andrés Vázquez (José María Yazpik), who gathers a team of experienced analysts, researchers and forensic specialists to work on the case. *Colosio*, in a similar vein to *Conejo en la luna*, is presented from the outset as a political thriller; and when the film was released, critics observed a lack of films belonging to this genre within national film history. Given the historical connections between the state and the film industry in Mexico, the productive context for a genre such as the political thriller has, until recently, been curbed due to a lack of artistic freedom of expression. As film critic Lucero Calderón notes in relation to *Colosio*:

me parece una cinta muy interesante pues representa un ejercicio de género en un terreno poco explorado en la cinematografía del país: el *thriller* político. Precisamente no se había trabajado más en ese rubro debido a que las condiciones políticas y, por consiguiente culturales de México, no lo permitían. (Calderón 2012b, 6)

Like *Conejo en la luna*, *Colosio* shares the former's concern with institutional corruption, developing its narrative within the framework of the political thriller, a genre that presents a mystery or puzzle that needs to be solved by a principal character. Accordingly, in *Colosio* we see the assassination of the presidential candidate as the central event of the film, and the quest to find the real culprits, aside from the arrested gunman Mario Aburto, propels the narrative forward and meets the generic criteria for plot development. The mystery behind who killed the candidate puzzles the main character, Captain Andrés Vázquez, and his team, and engages the audience in a fictional examination of probable conclusions. The whodunit structure of the film's narrative offers layers of meaning upon an event that shocked the nation and set in motion a sense of collective mourning. In this sense, *Colosio*'s narrative develops according to the police thriller model, in that it seeks to address the question of whodunit in relation to the murder of the presidential candidate. The narrative drive thus borrows from the *modus operandi* of the detective fiction genre; a paradigm that is transferable across national borders and is in dialogue with the context of its production. As José Colmeiro (2001) notes:

Detective fiction [...] was born out of the need to explain the unexplainable that defies logic and threatens the established normality, to bring back the bourgeois order temporarily destroyed by the transgression of the law, by means of implementing scientific positivist methodologies and deductive logical reasoning. (52)

Although following the narrative archetype provided by the detective fiction genre, seen principally in the protagonist's role and actions, *Colosio*, as many critics highlight, also belongs to the political thriller, as observed above. Mexican writer Julio Patán (2012) notes that, although undoubtedly a political thriller, the film aligns itself with what has been termed as "conspiracy cinema" because:

El conspiracionismo le sienta [sic] bien al *thriller*. Más: le es indispensable [...] El *thriller* necesita conspiraciones: el thriller político, teorías de la conspiración. Es decir, complots todoabarcantes, sin fisuras, imputables a algo que se conoce como el "sistema", una entidad indefinida. (65)

Conspiracism fits well with the thriller. In fact it is indispensable [...] The thriller needs conspiracies and the political thriller needs conspiracy theories. In other words, all-encompassing plots without fissures attributable to some-thing known as the 'system' constituting an undefined entity.

Thus, the existence of conspiracy theories is fundamental to *Colosio*'s generic character as a political thriller. Furthermore, in terms of the thriller genre within the literary realms, Alberto Moreiras (2007) highlights an ethical dimension corresponding to the narrative and states that its purpose is to "unveil" and not just "express" the treatment of murder (147). He further notes that a "thriller is, in every case, an ethical aestheticization of politics. It renders the political in a narrative form, and it does so from a primarily ethical stance" (147). This recognition of the ethical role within the genre is crucial for our readings of *Colosio* in terms of the resulting effect of the film. The assassination of a presidential candidate (because of his political views, as it is insinuated in the film) is seen as the unethical deed committed and one which requires correction through the unveiling of the culprits. By restoring the order to the disorder caused by the elimination of an important political figure, Andrés' investigation is driven by the ethical desire to put right what has been done wrong. Therefore, Bolado has chosen the political thriller to narrate the events concerning the assassination because it is precisely the models of representation assigned to this particular genre that provide the narrative with an ethical purpose. As Moreiras notes: a "thriller is always a political reaction to a suspension of ethics. A crime against a human being is always a suspension of ethics" (156). In an interview, the actor who plays the Machiavellian "Doctor" in the film, Daniel Giménez Cacho, describes the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio as containing Shakespearean dimensions, noting that the murder of a political candidate is tantamount to the obliteration of social order itself (Baños 2012). The sense of collective loss that was felt by the Mexican populace following the assassination, amid its growing fears of becoming a society governed by violence, was witnessed widely.⁵ Furthermore, the political arena depicted in the film is characterized by its challenging ethical discourse, and by the prominence of the morally corrupt environment within which the main players navigate their course to power.

Bolado's choice to opt for the political thriller as a framework for depicting the events of 1994, therefore, forms part of an international cinematic practice that characterizes the genre in what Moreiras terms as "the dominant, and perhaps even normative narrative structure of our time" (147). In film history, we have observed a political thriller prosper in Hollywood productions, particularly as a response to the cultural context of the Cold War, seen in films such as John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), shortly followed by his *Seven Days in May*

(1964), and, later, Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), a film that would come to redefine the genre. The focus of the narrative in this film follows *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman), as they investigate the story that would become known as the Watergate scandal, which ultimately implicated senior White House officials in the acts of coercion and corruption. Subsequently President Richard Nixon became the focus of speculation concerning Watergate, and in 1974 was forced to resign as president of the United States.

Set within a context of conspiracies and paranoia regarding a "higher power" maneuvering significant events that shape society, political thrillers articulate common anxieties concerning unexplained events of historical significance (Darwin et al. 2011, 1289). Forming the crux of such theories, a conspiracy is seen as an endeavor that "involves multiple agents, working together in secret in order to realize hidden goals that are malevolent or unlawful" (1289). In the United States, events such as the John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy assassinations, alongside the more recent 9/11 attacks, form contextual bases for conspiratorial theories to take shape. In Mexico, vernacular speculation took precedence over official statements made in the media following the assassination of Colosio, where word on the street pointed toward the state's masterminding of the crime. These observations are highlighted in Bolado's film and are processed via the medium of radio broadcasts, voiced by Vázquez's girlfriend, Verónica (Kate del Castillo). In this context the radio presenter embodies the *vox populi* of the nation, articulating social anxieties and the suspicion felt following the arrest of the alleged assassin Mario Aburto (Volpi 1999; Aguilar Camín 2014).

CONTEXTS

As mentioned earlier, the film begins with the following epigraph: "hay décadas en las que no pasa nada, y semanas en las que pasan décadas" (There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen). The *mise-en-scène* then moves on to a ninety-second sequence of audio and film clips, in addition to newspaper cuttings, which together provide a social context for the months leading up to the event. We witness reporting on the increasing narco violence and the linking of cartel chief Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán with the assassination of Cardinal Posadas Ocampo in November 1993, the first of several high-profile

assassinations in less than a year. The images convey the official inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Carlos Salinas de Gortari's voice can be heard introducing the new accord. Through framed newspaper headlines, we see the emergence of the EZLN, coupled with the extra-diegetic presence of subcomandante Marcos' voice describing who the insurgents are. These utterances are juxtaposed with the photographic evidence of armed conflict in Chiapas in response to the EZLN's declaration of war upon the Mexican government, as discussed in Chap. 2. Colosio himself is introduced through the newspaper clippings that outline the initial stages of his presidential campaign, and an observation is made on the media's initial lukewarm reception to the candidate. The *mise-en-scène* presents the viewer with frames of Colosio's speech at the Plaza de la Revolución in Mexico City on the sixty-fifth anniversary of the PRI, an event that was destined to alter public opinion in favor of the candidate as outlined through the encircled newspaper headline: *La revolución Colosista* (the Colosist Revolution). It was during this speech that Colosio attempted a public relaunch of his political persona, and outlined his proposed reforms for the party, a move that many signaled as a possible motive for his assassination, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Straight after this scene, we are presented (as if conclusively) with footage from the Lomas Taurinas rally, which is promptly followed by the visual and audio recording of the decisive gunshot that ended the life and career of the candidate. The montage sequence then presents the viewer with a blank screen and the script—"Esta es una ficción basada en hechos reales" (this is fiction based on real events)—which both situates the film within a historiographical metafiction framework and also initiates the debate concerning fiction and reality pertinent to a reading of the film's narrative from its outset. Some drew attention to Bolado's choice to classify the film as "fiction based on real events" since the narrative explores a historical reality that remains present within the public imaginary (Ellingwood 2012). However, the artistic freedom that is awarded through fiction, which sees the alliance of fictional characters sharing screen space with representatives of historical figures, allows for an exploration of possible conclusions to the question of who masterminded the assassination. Furthermore, through the creation of fictional characters, in addition to the representation of historical characters, Bolado can explore and bring to the screen the conspiracy theories circulating at the time of the aftermath of Colosio's assassination. Mexican moviegoers are thus able to recognize the character of "el Doctor" as that of Dr. José María Córdoba

Montoya, who was chief of staff during Salinas' time in government and Vázquez's police counterpart in Tijuana, Benítez, as that of Federico Benítez López, chief of public security in Tijuana, who had been investigating the Colosio murder and was himself assassinated on April 23, 1994. Equally the character of "El Licenciado" represents Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and "Dr. Torres" is a replica of the special prosecutor Dr. Miguel Montes, the first assigned to lead the Special Fiscal investigation in 1994. Bolado has kept the Salinas brothers Raúl and Carlos, Manuel Camacho Solís, the figure of Luis Donaldo Colosio, his widow, Diana Laura Riojas, alongside Don Fernando as true to a screen representation of their historical counterparts as is possible. Meetings, events, and conversations are recreated for the audience who recognize their significance from newspaper reports that were in circulation at the time. Thus, the opening claim that the film constitutes a fiction based on real events allows for the hybrid fabric of the narrative to take shape, outlining possible speculations concerning the event. And crucial to an understanding of this aim is the exploration of the footage which is shown during the opening sequence and then subsequently re-examined both by the public gaze and by Vázquez's investigative team during the course of their work.

Recorded by a PGR official worker on the day of the Lomas Taurinas rally, the now-infamous one-minute-and-twenty-eight-second footage captures the final moments leading up to, and including, the assassination of the presidential candidate. Captured from a superior-level angle, the camera follows the trajectory of the candidate as he leaves the platform from whence he has addressed an audience, and proceeds to walk through the multitude. As more and more supporters keen to shake hands and speak with Colosio slowly surround him, the candidate's security team become engulfed in the crowd and crucially lose their strategic protective positions. The ensuing chaos of the overwhelming masses that surround the candidate creates the ideal context for the infiltration of a weapon and the close approximation of the assassin to his target, from where he is able to shoot his victim in the cranium with a .38 caliber Taurus revolver. The moment of the mortal gunshot is captured for eternity by the PGR camera, and the film's contents will constitute the evidential material that will be intricately scrutinized by forensic scientists, detectives, attorney generals and four special fiscal investigations over the course of six years. The same images will also become iconized over time due to their repeated screenings, and thus embedded within the public imaginary as visual relics of a traumatic past event. A range of critics have compared this event and

its testifying footage to the case of JFK's assassination, also recorded by an amateur camera (Sotelo 2012, 13; Aviña 2012, 4; Jordán 2012, 11; Cayuela 2012, 68). However, contrary to the JFK footage, which was released to the public in phases, blocking out the critical moment of the president's death through the mortal head wound until years later, the Colosio footage was shown on Mexican television networks shortly after the announcement of his death. These same frames would dominate the public field of vision in the months following the event, and would be replicated in both still and moving forms of the image. Now accustomed to these images of the assassination, Mexican moviegoers recognize the footage inserted into the narrative of Colosio as a reality that has established itself as a visual palimpsest, taking on levels of meaning beyond its denotative origins, to now stand as an iconic example of the traumatic events of 1994.

The insistent repetition of the traumatic moment of Colosio's death that is to be found in the process of revisioning the PGR's footage fits in with Freudian observations on the act of reliving past traumas as a process of appropriation and thus resolution of an otherwise repressed pathology (Caruth 1995; Frances and Hallas 2007). Mirroring the condition of the individual subject that has become traumatized, a collective may find itself reliving and reexamining the traumatic event that has ruptured the social fabric and shattered illusions of peace, as was the case of Mexico in 1994. Thus, the events of 1994 can be harnessed under the term "cultural trauma," which according to Jeffrey Alexander (2011),

occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (307)

Key to the processing of such cultural traumas is the need to find an explanation for the event via its representation. In relation to this observation, Ron Eyerman (2011) suggests that cultural trauma "calls attention to the negotiated recollection of events and to the role of representation" (306). He argues that the collective experience of remembering the trauma assists in the creation of a cognitive map through which the shaping of individual and social identity takes place, noting that:

The past is a collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point [...] what the past means is recounted, understood and interpreted and transmitted through language and through dialogue. These dialogues are framed as stories, narratives which structure their telling and influence their reception. (305)

Linked to the need for a representation of the traumatic event, Alexander (2011) suggests that in order for “traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises” (308). The death of Colosio, moreover, reverberated across sectors of society because it mirrored the condition of national politics, leading to the need for a redefinition. Such collective traumas require reflection because in Alexander’s view “identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only socially fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self” (309). And it is this link between past influences upon the present national condition that Bolado confirms is the driving force behind his re-creation of the Colosio case.

The traumatic moment in the nation’s consciousness is therefore encapsulated in the image of the shotgun being pointed at the head of the presidential candidate, as captured by the PGR camera. A break from a familiar past occurs at the moment of the bullet’s impact, and the chaos of the following months is epitomized in the panicking crowds, framed as a response to the unloading of the shotgun, and the subsequent lynch mob descending on the alleged assassin. These same images, of a disorganized crowd surrounding Colosio, of the (faceless) assassin’s revolver hovering over the heads of those close to the candidate, and of the gunshot that changed the course of political history—are examined and re-examined by Andrés Vázquez and his team, and subsequently by the audience’s gaze constituting counterimages and zoomed frames of differing angles and areas of the footage. These images become crucial witness texts of the occurrence, and their scrutiny alludes to hidden plots, unknown participants and a possible conspiracy against the presidential candidate. Thus, these images outline what Stella Bruzzi (2000) calls the “footage’s burden of proof,” where visual testimony to the event is framed by the gaze’s desire to decipher further evidence in the quest for answers (16). In this context, Bruzzi analyzes the Zapruder film, which captured the last moments of John F. Kennedy’s life and, like the Colosio footage, provided visual evidence of the assassination which subsequently became the source of exhaustive investigative analyses. Bruzzi’s observations, applicable here

to a reading of the Colosio footage, recognizes the paradoxical position of the image in relation to the Zapruder film where “as an authentic record, it functions as incontrovertible ‘evidence’, whilst as a text incapable of revealing conclusively who killed President Kennedy it functions as an inconclusive representation” (16). Although this is not the angle taken by Bolado in his presentation of Vázquez’s examination of the Colosio footage, the process undergone in the frame-by-frame dissection of the film coincides with Bruzzi’s observations on the resulting effect of what is simply the representation of a fatality. Here her suggestion that the onlooker of the image desires for it to prove itself as a reliable witness text, and as testimony to the probable source of the conspiracy, parallels the role of the raw footage used in Colosio. Applicable also to a reading of the PGR footage, Bruzzi observes that the “Zapruder film has become the dominant assassination text, onto which is poured all the subsidiary grief, anger, belief in conspiracy and corruption surrounding the unresolved events it depicts” (17). During one important scene in Colosio, we witness Vázquez persistently watching and rewinding the same frames from the PGR footage concerning the moment of the trajectory of the revolver toward Colosio’s head, and the capturing of a bloodied Aburto following the candidate’s assassination. Jessica Wax-Edwards has observed that during these scenes:

The frames and camera angles chosen suggest that Vázquez can and will identify something within the footage. By watching and rewatching the imagery, it is inferred that Vázquez will discover the true reason for Colosio’s murder. Equally the demonstrative shots of the remote control and the recorded footage underline the central role of the visual medium in solving the case. (2013, 77–78)

The extensive examination of the frame-by-frame contents of the PGR footage does indeed lead the main character in the film to piece together the necessary evidence so as to formulate a conclusion that points toward a state-instigated plot to assassinate Colosio, a theory that is reenacted by Vázquez and his team in the final scenes of the film. Assisted by insider witness statements and exhaustive investigative research, the protagonist concludes what, at first, appears to fulfill the thriller genre’s requirements for a sense of restored order at the finale. In this way, the final scenes initially appear to adhere to Moreiras’ observations that “the thriller is not a means to an end but an affirmation of the end as an ethical end” (2007,

150). Such ethical ends, however, are not provided by the film. Consistent with the inconclusiveness that characterizes the Colosio case, Bolado chooses instead to end his narrative with the annihilation of the main protagonists, including Vázquez and his girlfriend Verónica, alongside several other characters associated with the case, which include “el licenciado,” who is put in charge of the subsidiary investigation. The final scene frames Vázquez’s lifeless body, which has been thrown into a now-contaminated river full of his own blood. The film’s last scene thus acts as an epilogue to the main narrative, and prophesizes further violence and death resulting from the events of 1994. In a closing image metaphorically borrowed from Virgil’s *The Aeneid Book VI*, Bolado presents his audience with the bleakest of outcomes for the nation’s future. Whereas Virgil’s oracle articulates a pessimistic vision of the Tiber River filled with blood, thus prophesizing a future dominated by war and loss in ancient Rome, Bolado’s bloody river motif at the end of the film visualizes a Mexican future shaped by the events of 1994. This idea is further emphasized by the statistics provided over the watery image at the end of the film, outlining the number of casualties directly and indirectly related to the Colosio case. Furthermore, the data also contextualize the present problematic of increasing levels of narco violence and growing instability in Mexican society as corresponding with the events of 1994 (Watt and Zepeda 2012). Linking these ideas, as observed earlier, is the bridging of past events with the present day. Significantly the connection of past and present elements becomes a means through which to process the cultural trauma that the Colosio case signified within the Mexican psyche, an event that has since been defined as a watershed moment in recent national history.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS FOR MURDER

As observed earlier, Bolado’s film commences with the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio and through a series of flashbacks reflects on the possible motives and contributing factors that may have led to a conspiracy plot against the candidate. In the film Colosio is presented as a man in search of his own political destiny, overshadowed by a public rivalry with fellow *priísta* Manuel Camacho Solís, but who nevertheless holds the favor of the outgoing president Salinas. Colosio comes across as a respected mediator amid an ideologically divided party and a devoted family man in private. As I mentioned in previous discussions, in the early months of 1994 the media’s coverage of Colosio’s election campaign was less than

favorable. The PRI's candidate for the presidency was portrayed lacking charisma and political focus. Such perceptions propelled Colosio's campaign team to redefine the candidate's public image. Matters were complicated by the rivalry existent between Colosio and Camacho Solís, which was fully played out in the national media, undermining Colosio's candidacy. Indeed, such antagonism between these politicians is alluded to in the film when Colosio's widow, Diana Laura Riojas (Ximena Rubio), refuses to assist the president by signing a letter that would publicly exonerate Camacho of any culpability in the Colosio case. Diana Laura refuses to cooperate with the president, both in fiction and as related by witnesses (Quintero and Zárate 1994, 113).⁶ As if through bad timing, or one of fate's ironic coincidences, Camacho had finally renounced any claims to the candidacy on March 22, 1994, one day before the assassination of his rival, declaring that "sí quiero ser presidente de la República, pero no a cualquier costo" (yes I do wish to become president of the Republic, but not at any cost) (Arriaga and Gisela 1994, 150). Just what said "cost" implies is left to speculation, and many recall the competitive nature of the relationship between both men as bordering on the hostile, possibly one of the motives behind why Diana Laura refused to fraternize with Camacho following her husband's death (Estrada 2012, 14).

The position maintained by the president during this whole process of fellow rivalry was one of observer, fueling the fallout, as Bolado's film outlines, through his promotion of Camacho as commissioner for the Peace in Chiapas during a period of significant instability, thus securing the latter's full coverage in the news. During this time, Salinas spoke out against the speculation regarding the replacement of Colosio as candidate for the presidency, by famously confirming: "no se hagan bolas: el candidato es Colosio" (don't get confused, Colosio is the candidate) and thus seeming to stand by his choice of successor (Quintero and Zárate 1994, 92). While appearing to support Colosio in public, the rumor mill continued to churn, and it was suspected that in private the president was less than satisfied with Colosio's political moves (Palma César 2004, 46). It was the perceived lack of public support, exacerbated by Camacho's refusal to acknowledge Colosio's candidacy following the *destape*⁷ in November 1993, alongside the unfavorable coverage in the press, that led Colosio's campaign team to rethink their strategies in pursuit of election victory. Thus, Bolado's film focuses on Colosio's reinvention as a political reformer and idealist, framed by the footage taken from the candidate's famous speech delivered at the Plaza de la Revolución in which he declared, "veo

a un México con sed y hambre de justicia” (I see a Mexico that is hungry and thirsty for justice). In this way, Colosio attempted to present himself as a man of the people. However, the journey toward public acceptance and political success was not easy. As acknowledged above, the initial months of Colosio’s presidential campaign were at first obscured by the emergence of an armed rebel movement in Chiapas, which dominated the headlines, relegating the candidate to the middle sections of the daily press. Thus, Colosio’s March 6 speech formed part of a carefully instigated plan to relaunch the campaign, and to represent the candidate in a new light, in the context of flagging opinion polls and a perceived decreasing popularity. Thus, a parallel was drawn by the press, positioning the more media-friendly and vociferous “other” candidate, seen in the figure of Camacho Solís, against Colosio, who was until then seen as the uncharismatic official candidate. It is acknowledged in the film that Colosio’s weakness was related to his public speaking, where he appeared to lack conviction and political focus. These issues were addressed by his campaign team, and the March 6 speech was put together (with the help of historian Enrique Krauze), tested on focus groups and then presented to a large receptive crowd at the Plaza de la Revolución on the sixty-fifth anniversary of the PRI. It was no coincidence, then, that the focus of said speech, given the context and timing of its delivery, indicated a desire to move away from previous modes of governing. In the speech, we find evidence of a pledge to listen to the Mexican populace and its grievances, alongside an endeavor to eliminate corruption, coercion and impunity from the political system.⁸

Perhaps the clearest indictment of the PRI as the possible culprit behind the killing is made via the character simply introduced in the film as “Don Fernando” (Emilio Echevarría) in an important scene shared with Andrés Vázquez. In this scene, Bolado sets the agenda for the staunchest and most direct political criticism made in the film thus far. The scene begins with special investigator Bertha (Karina Gidi) and her boss Vázquez, as they arrive at the ornate offices of Don Fernando. An important member of the old guard, Don Fernando is an experienced politician, having served during the Miguel Alemán presidency (1946–1952), holding prominent positions within the government and its security offices throughout a career spanning over half a century. The character of Don Fernando is modeled on Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, a PRI veteran who devoted most of his life to public service. During a meeting held with Gutiérrez Barrios

in 1994, Oppenheimer (1996) makes the following observation regarding the politician:

Pocos políticos de la vieja guardia inspiraban más temor que don Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, la figura tenebrosa que había dirigido el aparato de inteligencia del país durante gran parte de las últimas tres décadas y que lideraba una de las camarillas políticas más poderosas del país. Don Fernando, como era conocido en el mundo político, tenía ya sesenta y siete años y había dejado su último puesto en el gobierno como secretario de Gobernación de Salinas en 1993, pero aún conservaba un lugar de primera línea en la vida política de México. (187)

Few politicians from the old guard inspired more fear than don Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, the tenebrous figure who had led the nation's intelligence apparatus during most of the last three decades, and currently was chief of one of the most powerful political groups in the country. Don Fernando, as he was known in the political world, was already sixty-seven years old, and had left his last official post as Salinas' Interior Minister in 1993; however he still maintained a prime position within Mexican political life.

In the film, Vázquez meets Don Fernando in the latter's study in order to find out more about the party's dealings in relation to the assassination. The camera frames moments of revelations, and a sense of conspiracy is achieved through close-up shots of eyes, mouths as they speak and fingers drumming in thought. Positioned behind the aging *priista*, we observe the framed image of Fidel Castro, recalling the veteran's days as an intelligence officer in Mexico, and the important role he once played just before the Cuban Revolution. As Oppenheimer confirms:

La marca distintiva de Don Fernando era haber forjado estrechos vínculos con la izquierda revolucionaria latinoamericana desde el día en que, como un joven oficial de inteligencia, había interrogado a un joven rebelde cubano llamado Fidel Castro, que estaba preparando una expedición para derrocar el régimen de Fulgencio Batista en Cuba. Gutiérrez Barrios había dejado en libertad a Castro, y su encuentro original había dado lugar a una cálida amistad con el dirigente cubano después del triunfo de la revolución en 1959. (188)

Don Fernando's distinctive mark was having established close ties with the Latin American revolutionary left, consolidated on the day when, as a young intelligence official, he had interviewed a young rebel by the name of Fidel Castro, who at the time was planning an expedition to topple the Fulgencia Batista regime in Cuba. Gutiérrez Barrios had let Castro go free,

and their initial encounter gave way to a warm friendship between the two, which continued after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959.

The use of the image of a highly influential *priista*, such as Gutiérrez Barrios, serves to legitimize the film's main accusations of conspiracy, whereby the character of Don Fernando makes revelations of political corruption to an increasingly uneasy Vázquez. Don Fernando outlines the trajectory of internal politicking, backstage maneuvers and the unfolding of the events that led up to the assassination of Colosio. The response to his posed question, “¿Quién lo mató? Fuente Ovejuna: todos lo mataron” (who killed him? Fuente Ovejuna: they all killed him), articulates the overarching suspicion that a government-instigated assassination was committed against a wayward candidate, metaphorically conducted in the manner of Lope de Vega's seventeenth-century play, *Fuente Ovejuna* (1619). The apprehensions relating to a collective involvement in Colosio's death circulated widely in the months following the event (Rico 1994; Fineman and Rotella 1996). These concerns grew stronger after the assassination of Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September of that year, as discussed above, where it was widely believed that responsibility for social instability lay with the PRI (Oppenheimer 1996, 199). Don Fernando's theory for the reason behind the Colosio assassination, moreover, ties in with the suspicions that, following Colosio's March 6 speech, President Salinas forthwith viewed the candidate's moves toward political independence as threatening to his legacy and power.

A STATE-INSTIGATED CRIME?

Once Colosio's closest confidant and staunchest supporter, Luis Colosio Fernández became a witness to the growing gap between his son, Luis Donaldo, and president Salinas during the candidate's last days. In an interview conducted with Samuel Palma César, Colosio Fernández recalls:

que los ambientes de campaña no matan, que un contexto no asesina; eso es cierto en el sentido literal, porque finalmente los asesinatos los cometen las personas. Pero ni duda cabe que Donaldo fue ultimado en un clima profundo de deterioro de sus relaciones con el presidente Salinas. (Palma César 2004, 52–53)

It is true that campaign environments and contexts don't literally commit murder, because those who perform assassinations are people. But there

is no doubt that Donaldo met his end during a climate of profound deterioration in his relationship with President Salinas.

These observations acknowledge the context of a deteriorating relationship between the outgoing president, Salinas, and his chosen successor, Colosio, at the time of the latter's assassination. In the film, the fact that there are motives, causes and contexts created for an assassination, which in turn point toward a crime of the state, is a given certainty in Don Fernando's mind. In this scene shared with Captain Vázquez, the aging politician confirms (in his capacity as former head of Mexican Intelligence) that the government knows how to protect its own, cautioning that the intelligence service should not be seen as inept. He goes on to observe how the conditions surrounding the candidate's death contravene guidelines in place for the protection of high political figures. With these statements Don Fernando echoes several of the same questions which were raised regarding the security provision for the candidate on the day of his murder (Cortés and Cordero 1996). For example, there is the choice of the location for the Tijuana meeting—"un verdadero ratero" (a real rat-hole), as comandante Benítez notes in the film—and the logistical maze that constituted the site of Lomas Taurinas, which contained only one entry and one exit point, thus providing an exemplary setting for an assassination to take place (Fig. 3.2).



Fig. 3.2 Comandante Benítez (Dagoberto Gama) in a scene from *Colosio: El asesinato*

Furthermore, as observed in the film, the subsequent breakdown of the security forces at the scene, in addition to the PRI's strict instructions to limit police presence at the event, lest it should "ruin" Colosio's image as that of a "man of the people," points toward a possible conspiracy in place in order to eliminate the candidate who had fallen out of favor with the outgoing government (Tomlinson 2009). Prior to the Lomas Taurinas meeting, witnesses recall a tense atmosphere on site, and a sense of foreboding among those present. Yolanda Lázaro, the PRI leader for Lomas Taurinas (who shared a platform with the candidate during his speech), in an interview on Discovery Channel's documentary, *El caso Colosio* (2010), reveals that prior to Colosio's arrival many supporters had chosen to leave the rally early exclaiming, "lo van a matar, lo van a matar" (they are going to kill him, they are going to kill him) (Tomlinson 2009). This observation is echoed in Cortés and Cordero's book, where they claimed that even Colosio himself had picked up on the tense atmosphere that day at Lomas Taurinas, and had expressed a desire to leave the location as soon as was feasibly possible (Cortés and Cordero 1996). The notion that this was a premeditated plot to eliminate the candidate is also explored in the film when comandante Benítez informs Vázquez of his findings which include witness statements that testify to Mario Aburto's revelations made in November 1993. Here the accused is quoted as saying that he planned on "carrying out something big" in March. Aburto's confirmations were made at a time when Colosio's official campaign trail had yet to be made public, as comandante Benítez highlights.

The idea of a potential political conspiracy is crystalized in the film during the setting of a dinner party in early March, following the candidate's speech at the Plaza de la Revolución. During this scene, the altercation between Raúl Salinas and Colosio is viewed as the definitive agent that sets in motion the planning of the candidate's future assassination which took place a few weeks later. Raúl is shown as frustrated at Colosio's moves to distance himself from the outgoing government, alongside his public declarations of ridding the political system of corruption. During this scene, Colosio is infuriated at the discovery of millions of dollars being expropriated from the treasury and points the finger at those present at the dinner party, an accusation of embezzlement with which Raúl Salinas will later be charged and incarcerated in 1995, as observed above. Raúl's murky business deals are commented upon by Don Fernando, who confides in Vázquez that the Salinas brothers had expected upmost loyalty from Colosio when the latter was initially named presidential candidate.

Bolado's inclusion of the character of Don Fernando in the film is significant. In his book, novelist and essayist Guillermo Samperio outlines an alleged meeting that took place between Colosio and the PRI veteran. During this meeting, it is alleged that an amicable conversation took place between the candidate and the veteran *priísta*. Here Gutiérrez Barrios is said to have advised Colosio to modernize and reenergize his campaign by reaching out to the Mexican public. According to Samperio (1995), Gutiérrez Barrios counseled the candidate:

se tienen que hacer a un lado las viejas fórmulas, buscar alianzas, abrir su abanico, incluir y no excluir [...] Atención especial requieren los sectores agraviados en su nivel de vida, en sus condiciones de trabajo, en su austera economía doméstica [...], sin justicia social, sin compromiso con los hechos concretos, la democracia se convierte en una abstracción sin relación con el país real, con el cuerpo social, con la nación de seres de carne y hueso [...] Hoy, para vencer hay que convencer, porque los votos cuentan y se cuentan. (95–96)

[...] old formulas need to be placed to one side, and there needs to be a search for new alliances, an opening of the fold, include and not exclude [...] Special attention needs to be paid to the aggrieved sector in terms of their quality of life, their working conditions, their austere domestic economy [...] deprived of social justice, without compromising concrete events, democracy becomes abstract, without any relationship with the country or with its social corpus, with human beings [...] Nowadays, one must convince in order to win, because votes count and are counted.

This statement seems to indicate that Gutiérrez Barrios' analysis of the political pulse of the nation influenced the contents of Colosio's definitive speech. Furthermore, Gutiérrez Barrios' recognition that election victory was no longer achievable through electoral fraud recalls the election results of 1988, whereby an alleged computer failure halfway through the counting process halted proceedings, at which point Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for the Frente Democrático Nacional (FDR) (National Democratic Front) had been in the lead. Once all functionality had been restored and the computers were back in order, Salinas was leading by a 50.6% majority, the lowest in the PRI's electoral history. In his biography, ex-president Miguel de la Madrid recalled the night of the rigged elections of 1988, acknowledging the fraudulent nature of the results, and his role in the process (Thompson 2004). After the results were announced and Salinas was declared the winner, the events of the previous night's proceedings caused

grave doubts concerning the legitimacy of Salinas' election win. Following the 1988 election, Gutiérrez Barrios was called to serve in Salinas' government as secretary of the interior at the height of diminishing public opinion. In *Colosio: El asesinato*, Bolado outlines what appears to be Don Fernando's ire at having been pushed to one side once his assistance was no longer needed, Salinas' rise in popularity having been achieved. The veteran politician's apparent bitterness over this action is what leads him to accuse the government of conspiring to assassinate Colosio, as revealed in the film, a notion that is demarcated by the multiple culprits the narrative explores.

NARCO DEMOCRACY

Possible motives for the candidate's assassination, however, are not only focused on an alleged fallout between Salinas and Colosio, but they extend to include the presence of organized crime. The allegation that the candidate refused to meet with leading cartel members during the early stages of his campaign has led observers to conclude a possible narco-related killing in relation to the case (Rico 1994). In the film, a character named "El Tecolote" (based on the ex-journalist and government official, Eduardo Valle Espinoza, who was also known as "El Búho" in real life) comes forth with evidence that proves that organized crime was behind the assassination of the presidential candidate. Mirroring the late Valle Espinoza, who died in May 2012, the filmic Tecolote declares a conspiracy involving the Juárez Cartel, which was intent on putting an end to the candidate's life due to a perceived threat to their future negotiations. He claims that drug lords killed the candidate because the Juárez Cartel thought that Colosio would favor the Gulf Cartel instead of them, and for that reason they wanted him dead. Tecolote confides in Dr. Montes that the Juárez cartel thought that the Gulf cartel had succeeded in guaranteeing protectionism from the government, claiming that "en Tampico les aseguraron negocio por 6 años, otro *sexenio*" (in Tampico they were assured that business would continue for another six years, another *sexenio*), recalling that he had tried to warn the authorities of the cartel's plans to eliminate the candidate. According to his testimony, in the film Tecolote asked to meet with the candidate but the response received was that Colosio could not see him until his return from Tijuana as he was busily focused on "restructuring his campaign." In real life, Valle Espinoza had previously been a student leader during the 1968 movement and in

the early 1990s was serving as advisor to the Attorney General at the PGR. On a personal note, El Búho considered Colosio as a close friend, and, following the candidate's assassination, sought refuge in the United States after his resignation from his post at the PGR in May 1994. And it is while in Washington that El Búho made his official accusations against prominent PRI members. In his statements, the ex-government aid submitted an 800-page dossier on the Colosio case to the Mexican Embassy in Washington DC, and requested that the documents be considered as proof of Mexican politicians' involvement with drug cartels, and of the latter's culpability in the Colosio case. El Búho alleged that prior to the Lomas Taurinas rally, more and more members of Mexico's organized crime had begun to align themselves with the candidate's security team (Rico 1994). He claims to have tried to infiltrate and join the security team in order to investigate further, but had been unable to do so because the candidate was assassinated before he could carry out his plans. In his document submitted in DC, El Búho alleges to have found clear links between organized crime and senior government representatives, naming among others, Dr. Córdoba Montoya, Salinas' chief of staff, and on whom the character of El doctor is based in the film. In September 1994, in an interview with Spanish newspaper *El País*, Valle Espinoza confirmed that he was in possession of substantial evidence that implicated senior-ranking politicians in negotiations with cartel members, as the periodical reports:

Eduardo Valle, El Búho, antiguo asesor de la Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), institución equivalente al Ministerio de Justicia, asegura que una red de narcopolíticos está detrás del atentado contra el candidato del gobernante Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) a la presidencia de México. No sólo eso: Valle da nombres y relaciona con esa red al ministro de Transportes y a varios altos funcionarios cercanos al presidente Carlos Salinas [...] Desde su posición, explica, pudo ver cómo el cartel había extendido sus tentáculos a las esferas gubernamentales, alcanzando a dos personajes clave: al secretario (ministro) de Comunicaciones y Transportes, Emilio Gamboa Patrón, que es responsable no sólo de la red aeroportuaria, sino también de la Policía Federal de Caminos, implicada en la lucha contra el narcotráfico, y a José Córdoba, entonces mano derecha del presidente Salinas y ahora representante de México ante el Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. (Rico 1994)

Eduardo Valle, El Búho, ex advisor to the Attorney General at the PGR, an institution equivalent to the Ministry of Justice, confirms that a network of narco-politicians are behind the attempt against the PRI presidential

candidate's life. However, not only that: Valle provides names and relates these to the same network, such as the minister for transport and various high ranking functionaries close to president Carlos Salinas [...] From his position [Valle Espinosa] explains how he was able to see the way in which the cartels had extended their tentacles within the governmental spheres, reaching two key people: the Secretary of Transports and Communications, Emilio Gamboa Patrón, who is responsible for the airport network, as well as the Camino Federal Police, which is involved in the fight against drugs, and also José Córdoba, who was at the time the right hand man of president Salinas, and now represents Mexico at the World Development Bank.

Valle Espinoza's protests at the levels of corruption inherent within the government claimed that these impeded his work within the PGR, where he once led an elite unit investigating organized crime. When he resigned his position in protest, Valle Espinoza accused Mexico of becoming blinkered in its condition as a "narco democracy" (Jordan 1999, 152–3). In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, following his resignation, El Búho acknowledges the slips in security provision at the Lomas Taurinas rally as not being accidental, adding that to "assassinate a person of such importance, it is absolutely indispensable to have the complicity of the federal authorities in infiltrating the security team of the presidential candidate" (Fineman and Rotella 1996). He goes on to declare that the links between the cartels and Colosio's murder are clear and direct. As the newspaper reported:

Valle [...] asserts that Colosio was murdered by drug cartel forces after he refused to meet with a brother of Juan García Abrego, head of the Gulf Cartel. "I cared a great deal for Colosio" said Valle. "It cannot be permitted that they announce that a lone assassin killed him and that they leave it at that. I believe Colosio was killed because he did not [negotiate] with the drug traffickers or the "narco-politicians"." [...] Valle expresses suspicion about two Colosio security chiefs—former federal police officers with alleged criminal pasts—and about Raúl Zorrilla, campaign coordinator of special events and a former transportation sub-secretary under [Emilio] Gamboa. He claims Zorrilla had "immense responsibility" in the protection of traffickers while working in the Transportation Ministry. (1996)

The rejection of the lone-assassin theory that Valle Espinoza alludes to in his statement above is one that is explored in the film and problematizes the investigative work conducted by Captain Andrés Vázquez and his

team. Articulated via Verónica during her radio broadcasts, the notion that the Aburto who was arrested at the scene differs from the man presented to the media in the days following the assassination feeds the conspiracy theories surrounding the case. In the film, a Juárez cartel *sicario* named Joel “la ballena” López is murdered in a Tijuana garage on the night of March 23, the same day as Colosio’s assassination. It is alleged in the film that a professional hit man known as El Seco is eliminating all traces of those associated with the crime. The physical likeness between Joel “la ballena” López and Mario Aburto thus fuels the rumor mill on the street, and puzzles Andrés and his team. In real life, on the evening of March 23, Ernesto Rubio Mendoza, along with one other person, was murdered in a Tijuana garage and just as depicted in the film, both were shot in the head (Sánchez and Badillo 2014). It was reported that the victim was a corrupt federal policeman who had close ties with the cartels and had dealings with the narcotics trade. As in the film, Rubio Mendoza’s physical resemblance to Mario Aburto was one that captured the imagination of a suspecting public that was already discrediting the lone-assassin theory. Matters were heightened by the actions of the first special fiscal, Dr. Montes, who, having examined the PGR footage, presented his theory of a conspiracy involving multiple participants. These persons, Montes alleged, had led Colosio through the crowds toward Aburto, and in the process had blocked the candidate’s security team’s path. At the time the case was further problematized due to a number of suspects who were arrested for their approximation to Colosio during the meeting, and their presence and behavior in the footage leading up to the assassination. These suspects, who were later released, included Tranquilino Sánchez Venegas, José Rodolfo Rivapalacio Tinajero (from the security group TUCAN), retired police officer Vicente Mayoral Valenzuela, Rodolfo Mayoral Esquer (son of Vicente Mayoral), Fernando de la Sota Rodalléguez (from the Grupo Omega), Héctor Javier Hernández Thomassiny, also known as “El Lentos,” and Mario Alberto Carrillo Cuevas, also known as “El Clavadista” and who Montes accused of obstructing the candidate’s way by tripping up in front of him. According to Montes’ investigations, this action provided enough time for Colosio to stop and momentarily become distracted in his trajectory, allowing for the assassin to shoot his target within close range. The final suspect was Othón Cortés Vázquez, who, during the third fiscal investigation, stood accused of firing the second shot that wounded the candidate in the abdomen (Tomlinson 2009). He was also released later due to lack of evidence. Although initially presenting a

hypothesis of multiple participants in the Colosio case, Dr. Montes later retracted his theory and concluded that Mario Aburto had acted alone, had fired both shots which had killed the candidate and had masterminded the whole crime. This conclusion was later confirmed in 2000 by the fourth special fiscal investigation led by Luis Raúl González Pérez and which took place over four years (Anon 2014). The final special investigation saw the Colosio case officially closed and concluded that Mario Aburto had acted alone prompted by a complex combination of personality disorder, social disaffection and a psychotic condition that destabilized the accused's perception of reality.

Not convinced by the solo-assassin theory, the makers of *Colosio* expand upon the original notion of multiple culprits and revisit the idea of a plot working within the framework of the conspiracy theories in circulation, in combination with the contradictions offered by the case and articulated in the national press. Although Mario Aburto may have pulled the trigger, the intellectual mastermind behind the crime, the film argues, is the state itself. Omnipotent, anonymous, united in guilt yet increasingly fragmented in practice, the PRI, it is argued, maneuvered through careful planning, the murders of both its presidential candidate and its senior politician seen in the figure of Francisco Ruiz Massieu several months later. What is more, the film's thesis lays the blame on the PRI for a number of other deaths related to the case following the assassination, alongside the continued bloodshed and increasing levels of violence. This, the film argues, constitutes the legacy left behind by seventy-one years of single-party rule and dictated autocracy. The projection of these ideas on the screen, as Bolado points out, has the aim of recuperating a sense of "memoria histórica" (historical memory), a concept that both belongs to the populace and continues to shape the modern nation and its political discourse.

NOTES

1. On the July 17, 1928, president-elect Alvaro Obregón was assassinated by Jose de León Toral, an opponent of Obregón's anti-Catholic policies.
2. The topic of transnationalism will be explored in more detail in Chap. 6 of this book.
3. Enrique Salinas de Gortari was the younger brother of Raul and Carlos. He was found dead in 2004. See Davilia, Israel and Silvia Chávez, 2004. 'Hallan muerto por asfixia a Enrique Salinas de Gortari; llevaba horas desaparecido.' *La Jornada* (December 7, 2004).

4. Since this book has gone to press, the Netflix drama *Crime Diaries: The Candidate* (2019) has been shown on the streaming platform. *The Candidate* is a portrayal of the Colosio case, which delves deep into the world of political corruption prevalent at the time of Colosio's assassination. In this drama, the accusatory finger is pointed squarely at the Salinas brothers, where the story is framed as a police thriller driven by the investigations of comandante Federico Benítez, played by Alberto Guerra. The conspiracies are also examined by Colosio's widow, Diana Laura Riojas de Colosio (Ilse Salas). It is possible to see many of the conclusions originally drawn by Bolado's film, seven years prior, also played out in the Netflix drama, including the theory of more than one assassin and the mistaken identity of the arrested gunman Mario Aburto.
5. This can be seen in the media's response to the event in the following weeks, and in the reporters' cries when the news broke out on the steps of the hospital in Tijuana which were captured on camera. Displays of mourning were also embodied in the appearance of black ribbons that were displayed, painted on or worn in public spaces. Additionally, the same black ribbon emblem was used to frame the campaign images of the candidate, distributed all over the country, so as to reference the state of national mourning.
6. It is well known that following her husband's assassination Diana Laura would no longer engage in friendly dialogue with the president, refusing to answer his phone calls and rebuffing the said letter exonerating Camacho.
7. The *destape*, or unveiling of the new presidential candidate, consisted of a system (no longer in place) whereby the outgoing president would introduce his chosen candidate to run for the presidency, on the eve of his last year in office.
8. In the film, Colosio prepares and delivers his speech that includes the accusatory proclamation: "Es la hora de cerrarle el paso al influyentismo, a la corrupción y a la impunidad" (it is time to close the door on influentialism, corruption and impunity).

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Drug Violence and Narco Wars Part I: Luis Estrada's *El infierno* (*Hell*) (2010)

La violencia del crimen organizado siempre ha estado latente; pero ahora coincide tal vez con la peor crisis económica moderna de este país, y eso crea un entorno, desde mi punto de vista, apocalíptico. (Vértiz de la Fuente 2010)

The violence of organized crime has always existed in a latent form, but now it coincides with the worst economic crisis this country has seen in modern times, and that creates an environment, which from my point of view, is apocalyptic. Luis Estrada

The 1990s saw Mexico shaken by a wave of political and economic instability alongside an increasing level of violence, as we have seen in earlier chapters of this book. This state of social flux was later reflected in the films emerging toward the end of the decade and well into the noughties, with genres developing within the industry that openly critiqued the government, while engaging with the economic social context of production, and offering alternative views to the official political discourse in circulation.¹ A neoliberal economic model brought in during the Salinas years had failed to fulfill its promises of national prosperity, and the insurgency fought in the southeastern regions of the country continued to overshadow the government of Ernesto Zedillo for the remainder of the decade of the 1990s. With the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) losing the general elections in 2000, Mexico hailed in the new millennium and the opening of a new political era in its history, seen in the elected *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) (National Action Party), under the

presidency of Vicente Fox. Winning with a majority of 42.52% of the votes, Fox promised to renew dialogues with the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), and set about extending invitations to its commanding body to participate in the historic televised debates within Congress. Fox's call for dialogue and political participation with the EZLN initiated the long Zapatista procession from Chiapas toward Mexico City in the early months of 2001, where the nation witnessed the insurgents leave the Lacandon jungle and head toward the capital, in a movement known and documented as the *La marcha del EZLN* (the EZLN march). However, Fox's presidency was not without controversy and by the end of his *sexenio* the former president, and his wife, Marta Sahagún faced accusations of corruption, bribery and the appropriation of unaccounted for monetary resources accumulated during Fox's time in office (Hernández 2006). Fox's successor, Felipe Calderón, brought with him a publicly contested election victory, with a majority win of 0.56% of the votes, against his main contender, the popular candidate for the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD) (Party of the Democratic Revolution), Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or AMLO, as he is referred to in the press.² Following the election results of 2006, suspicions of foul play were rife and López Obrador embarked on a legal challenge of Calderón and his majority win, contesting the latter's leadership, and proclaiming himself the "Legitimate President of Mexico." The summer of 2006 saw the capital gripped by protests and road blockages instigated by the López Obrador campaign and its supporters, amid wide-scale calls for a recount. In November of that same year, López Obrador took part in an alternative proclamation ceremony where he was "sworn in" as president of the Republic to a crowd of supporters at the Plaza de la Constitución in Mexico City. Within media circles there were mixed reactions to López Obrador's staged proclamation of legitimacy as president, and in the international press, periodicals such as the Spanish newspaper *El País* condemned what they saw as López Obrador's disregard for the democratic process (Relea 2006).

It was under this cloud of controversy, with the effects of doubt cast over his election victory, that Calderón began his *sexenio*, and was sworn in as president on December 1, 2006. Less than a fortnight later, however, Calderón sent in federal troops to the state of Michoacán, which was then home to the now-defunct Familia Michoacana cartel, and with this action began what has since been termed as the "Mexican drug war," setting in motion one of the bloodiest periods in recent national history.

MEXICO'S DRUG WAR

The climate of violence in Mexico since 2006 has witnessed the drug crisis escalate to unruly proportions and expand throughout the country. The so-called drug war has been comprised of, among other factors, the ongoing feud between rival cartels and the increased military presence in the affected areas, alongside the rapid ascendancy of new cartels that bring with them differing approaches to organized crime. At the time of writing, the official death toll since the start of the now termed “narco war” stands at almost 164,000 with over 60,000 lives claimed during Calderón's *sexenio* alone (Breslow 2015). Further problematizing the issue, Mexico's severe economic climate has perpetuated the escalating violence funded by the narco-armed territorial struggle for control and supremacy, set against the federal army's ongoing conflict against factions of organized crime.

The next two chapters will scrutinize how these moments of social crisis are treated by two films that form part of a growing narco filmic genre emerging from Mexico. My analyses will focus on these different treatments of the social problem, starting with an observation on one of the first films to deal with the topic in national cinema, seen in Luis Estrada's *El infierno* (*Hell*) (2010), which takes on a satirical approach to the social problem. Chapter 5 will then turn to address a different portrayal of the conflict, seen in the award-winning *Heli* (dir. Amat Escalante, 2013), whose observations lead us to the depiction of a community torn by narco violence. Whereas Estrada's *El infierno* tackles the drug crisis through the element of dark humor, a method used to heighten the accusations of political corruption that underpin the narrative, Escalante's disturbing psychological analysis of the emotional impact of social violence upon the individual forms the crux of the film's narrative questioning. In the case of *El infierno*, my analysis will show how the film's humor provides the framework for multiple readings of a discourse concerned with scrutinizing a national condition. In this context, the film's critical focus remains firmly placed upon members of Mexico's past and present political order, its established institutions such as the church, the federal and municipal police forces, and Calderón's war on drugs policy, taking into account the cartels' aggressive response to the government's stance. And in Escalante's vision of the problem, the camera focuses on the narco war as seen through the eyes of a family who unwittingly becomes embroiled in the conflict. *Heli*'s disquieting portrayal of violence set amid a narco war that rages outside of the domestic realm, forms the premise from which to observe the status quo as experienced through the microcosmic lens.

However, before a filmic analysis can take place on how the Mexican drug crisis is addressed and critiqued in both *El infierno* and *Heli*, a brief observation on the historical events that have led the nation to a condition of conflict is needed so as to contextualize the film. It is important to note, however, that it is not the intention of this study to provide an exhaustive examination of the socioeconomic imperatives at the heart of the narco crisis, as these remain beyond the scope of this investigation. Neither will I claim to scrutinize in detail the historical events that have shaped the narco war from its initial stages, since these are complex, multi-angled and fall outside of the parameters of the intended examinations taking place in the next two chapters. This investigation will, however, aim to explore how Mexican cinema—specifically, Estrada’s *El infierno* and Escalante’s *Heli*—addresses and represents the current crisis. It will do so by examining the films’ dialogic relationship with the context of their making, by observing how, for example, the filmic texts engage in the task of social critiquing, commenting on and scrutinizing the conflict and its effects upon individual lives.

CALDERÓN’S *SEXENIO* AND THE CARTELS

Observers agree that the levels of violence witnessed during the narco-conflict is unprecedented in modern Mexican history, as noted earlier, and they point toward political changes in relation to the drug crisis which have been pivotal in altering the way Mexican cartels operate and conduct business, as will be discussed below (Grayson 2010; Hernández 2012). In December 2006, the newly sworn-in president Felipe Calderón launched an anti-corruption policy which included a position of no tolerance in relation to the illegal narcotics trade (Langton 2012). The government’s new adopted stance and the subsequent violent response from the cartels would escalate into what has now been termed as the “drug crisis,” or the so-called narco war. Although he later attempted to redefine his government’s position, Calderón’s proclaimed plans to tackle and decrease Mexico’s participation in the global narcotics trade has resulted in one of the bloodiest periods in modern national history. Although an element of conflict between rivalling cartels and federal authorities has existed for several decades, it was not until 2006 that the number of casualties began to escalate to a critical state. Commentators point toward Calderón’s decision on December 11, 2006, to send in federal troops to the state of Michoacán (the home of the cartel formerly known as La Familia

michoacana) as a defining moment, and one which would set in motion the subsequent condition of narco-related violence witnessed on Mexican streets (Langton 2012). Thus, Calderón's move to send in an army of close to 7000 men to Michoacán signified for some an open declaration of war upon the Mexican cartels, an action that has since defined his *sexenio*, and constitutes a problematic legacy left behind after his departure from Los Pinos (Langton 2012, 104). In her book, *México en llamas: El legado de Calderón (Mexico in Flames: Calderón's Legacy)* (2012), Anabel Hernández predicts that Calderón

será recordado por los cinco principales legados de su gobierno: el infinito poder del narcotraficante Joaquín *El Chapo* Guzmán, intocable en su sexenio; el asesinato impune de 60 mil personas, víctimas de la llamada guerra contra el narcotráfico, más de 20 mil desaparecidos, 56 periodistas ejecutados, y 13 desaparecidos, la destrucción de su partido político, un México controlado por carteles, grupos criminales y brigadas de mercenarios; y el regreso del PRI a Los Pinos. (1–2)

will be remembered for the five principle legacies left by his government: the insurmountable power of Joaquín *El Chapo* Guzmán, who was untouchable during his sexenio; the assassination with impunity of 60 thousand people, victims of the so-called war on drugs, with more than 20 thousand disappeared, 56 executed journalists, and 13 of these made to disappear, the destruction of his political party, and a Mexico controlled by cartels, criminal groups and mercenary brigades; alongside the return of the PRI to Los Pinos.

Hernández's investigative work has scrutinized both PAN *sexenios* (2000–2012), denouncing the extravagant tastes of the Fox administration (2000–2006), and in particular the abuses of power undertaken by his wife, Marta Sahagún, seen in the alleged appropriation of funds, and undisclosed household expenses, that became known and ridiculed in media circles as “toallagate.”³ It was Hernández who broke the story while she was still working for the newspaper *Milenio*, where she denounced the excesses of an administration that seemed ethically challenged in its obliteration of electoral promises of austerity, and in its use of public funds for the benefit of personal endeavors and material acquisitions. The *Milenio* investigation exposed what appeared to be a moral vacuum in the Fox administration, with the critical focus aimed at the president and his wife for their extravagant betrayal of the PAN's 2000 election manifesto. The work won Hernández the Mexican National Journalism Award in

2002, and went on to form the basis of what would become a much lengthier study of the Foxista life of excess and corruption seen in her books *La familia presidencial* (*The Presidential Family*), and *El fin de la fiesta en los pinos* (*The End of the Party in Los Pinos*), published in 2005 and 2006, respectively. In her later book *Los cómplices del presidente* (*The President's Accomplices*) (2008), Hernández turns her investigation to focus on the collaboration between the PAN's secretariat of the interior, Juan Camilo Mouriño, and the secretary of public security, Genaro García Luna, during the Calderón years. Both men at the time of Calderón's *sexenio* were close allies of the then president, and both men were later accused of bribery and corruption. Perhaps more worryingly for the outgoing president, in 2012, the drug trafficker Edgar Valdez Villarreal, alias "La Barbie," admitted that he and organized crime groups had regularly paid bribes to García Luna and several other high-ranking federal police officers, including Édgar Eusebio Millán Gómez, Luis Cárdenas Palomino, Victor Gerardo Garay Cadena and Facundo Rosas Rosas (Mayorga 2012). This inevitably cast a shadow on the credibility of the Calderón administration, and more specifically, its so-called declaration of war on the cartels, given the now-disgraced García Luna's close alliance with the former president. In her investigations, Hernández exposes the impunity existent at the core of national governance in relation to proven irregularities, which included the fraternizing with organized crime. Despite the publicly declared war on drugs, and its direct links with the Calderón and, to some extent, Fox *sexenios*, the PAN administrations, it is alleged, failed to deliver on electoral promises of transparency and the eradication of institutional corruption. As a follow up to her book *Los cómplices del presidente*, in *México en llamas*, Hernández researches the issues of political impunity and state corruption, the activities of which involved members of the upper echelons of power. Through her analysis in *México en llamas*, the author sets about examining the unofficial story behind the war on drugs, its public campaign and the lasting effects of nearly a decade's worth of social violence and instability, an endeavor continued by Hernández in more detail in her next book, *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers* (2013). In her critically acclaimed *Narcoland*, Hernández proposes that the outcome of the narco war appears to have benefitted some cartels more than others, creating a conflict amid the newly established networks of crime. This is apparent in the case of, for example, the Zetas, and the more newly formed Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, who have gained momentum and power in the midst of conflict and confusion,

benefiting from the fragmentation of rival syndicates such as the now-disbanded Familia michoacana cartel and the significantly weakened Arellano Félix Organization. All the while, however, at the time of writing, established members of organized crime, such as the Sinaloa cartel, saw themselves prosper and their influence increase over the last decade. While Calderón's *sexenio* will be remembered for the increased levels of narco violence, during which images of competing cartels and federal forces involved in the war on drugs dominated national and international media outlets, it appears that by way of paradox, other factions of organized crime, gained increasing prosperity and insuperable levels of power (Hernández 2012). Such was the case of the aforementioned *El Chapo* Guzmán, whose power Hernández (2012) labeled as "untouchable." In her analysis, Hernández (2012) questions how it came about that during an officially sanctioned war on drugs, the Sinaloa cartel continued to thrive, and, specifically, the business dealings of its leader, *El Chapo*, greatly prospered, resulting in the significant increase of his personal wealth and power.⁴

Nowhere can *El Chapo*'s influence and power be more clearly seen than in the example of his second sensational escape from prison conducted in 2015. The first time *El Chapo* was officially arrested was while trying to enter Guatemala in 1993, following the assassination of Cardenal Osada Ocampo in Guadalajara. Despite being sentenced to twenty years in prison, *El Chapo*'s illicit business affairs continued to thrive under the command of his brother, Arturo Guzmán. And the alleged use of subornation thus ensured the continuation of a luxurious lifestyle for *El Chapo* while living behind bars. *El Chapo* escaped the penitentiary on January 19, 2001, allegedly with the full assistance of bribed prison guard personnel (Berenson 2016). Next, after a much publicized second arrest on February 22, 2014, a year of debate and media scrutiny ensued. In the press speculation took place as to the authenticity of the named prisoner, whether he would be extradited to the United States, and the questioning of whether the infamous *El Chapo* Guzmán would finally face justice. However, on July 11, 2015, *El Chapo* managed to elude his captors once again, and escaped from the high-security prison in Almoloya de Juárez, State of Mexico, where he was being held. So following on from the media frenzy that his second arrest had created, which included the televised spectacle of a handcuffed *El Chapo* framed before the cameras, Mexico's notorious cartel leader, who until 2014 had been named by Forbes as one of the world's most powerful people, managed to evade the law once again. And

it was thanks to the use of an underground tunnel that linked parts of a prison restroom area to a house construction site less than a mile away that *El Chapo* Guzmán was able to disappear into the night.⁵

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NARCOTICS TRADE IN MEXICO

The current crisis, although widely reported as a phenomenon of recent times and the result of the political strategies of the Calderón administration, must be viewed in the context of a gradual development over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, when the early traffickers in Mexico began to trade with the Colombian cartels. Although intrinsically complex and beyond the confines of this study, a brief overview of the trajectory of organized crime in Mexico will be made below in order to contextualize the narrative of *El infierno*. My analysis will focus on the film's engagement with the social realities facing Mexicans, which in turn provides a social context for the events shaping *Heli* as will be observed in Chap. 5. Some critics have speculated that the current competitive and conflictive environment of the cartels began in the 1970s, with its oldest organization, the Gulf cartel, founded in its current form by Juan García Ábrego, establishing itself as a major smuggling corporation (Vulliamy 2010). Earlier examples of the Gulf cartel can be traced back to the 1930s, under the guidance of Juan Nepomuceno Guerra (who ran an earlier version of the Gulf cartel known as the Matamoros cartel), and who capitalized on the rising demand for illegal alcohol in the United States during Prohibition. It is important to note that it was not until the 1970s, however, that the cartels in Mexico began to traffic with narcotics. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of the Juárez cartel, founded by Rafael Aguilar Guajardo. The Juárez cartel was later followed by the Tijuana and Sinaloa cartels in the late 1980s, both of whom had operated previously under Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, founder of the Guadalajara Cartel until his arrest in 1989 (Langton 2012). Following his transference to a top security unit, Félix Gallardo's organization became divided into two factions; one formed the Tijuana cartel, which was run by Arellano Félix brothers, and the other became the Sinaloa cartel, which was headed by the abovementioned *El Chapo* Guzmán. Throughout the 1980s, Mexican organized crime grew in strength and numbers and consisted of syndicates with complex infrastructures which were engaged in the production and supply of marijuana and opium. These same organizations provided a service for the Colombian cartels which entailed the

transportation of (Colombian) cocaine northbound, from Central to North America. By the late 1980s, however, the Mexican cartels altered their method of trading with the Colombians and modified the form of payment received for services rendered. Initially Mexican drug traffickers received payment in currency for their services of transportation. By the late 1980s, however, this arrangement was changed to include partial payments in the form of a percentage of the Colombian merchandise, a move that, as Vulliamy (2010) notes, gradually gave more autonomy for the Mexican cartels within the trade. Such developments over time signaled a modification to the role maintained by the Mexican cartels, from that of arranging and securing transportation of illegal narcotics northbound, witnessed during the initial stages of the arrangements with the Colombian cartels, to one that entailed the distribution of the merchandise. This process gave way to the Mexican cartel's eventual move toward the local manufacturing of additional illegal substances such as methamphetamine, adding to their stock of merchandise and sales. Such a rise in productivity and engagement at various levels of the trade (from the realms of production, to transportation and distribution) ensured the prosperity of Mexican organized crime, and has secured its global position as a principal player, surpassing the authority once maintained by the Colombian cartels. It is important to note that each major cartel in Mexico mentioned above established itself initially in terms of its area of governance alongside the trafficking routes it maintained and dominated, which has led to armed conflict over important US entry points. Thus, the social unrest experienced in Mexico since 2006 has been problematized due to the increasing rivalry between cartels over territories, or *plazas*, due to the rapidly growing demand for narcotics and the profits associated with the trade, fueling the ongoing so-called drug war (Vulliamy 2010). This position has created a context whereby the traditionally well-established syndicates such as the Gulf, Sinaloa and Tijuana cartels now face more competition than ever before from the rapidly emerging rival organizations, such as the Zetas in the northwestern sections of the country, the Knights Templar based in Michoacán and the newly established Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, all of whom have been keen to maintain their grip on their territories, while expanding their empires at all costs. One example of this development can be seen in the rapid ascension of the aforementioned Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, also known as "los mata Zetas" (Zeta killers) (Associated Press 2011). Used in the past by the Sinaloa cartel as an armed faction

against the Zetas in its territory, at the time of writing, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación is regarded as one of the most dangerous and rapidly growing cartels operating in Mexico.

A harsh economic climate combined with a sharp rise in unemployment has been considered as contributing factors behind the cartels' growth in numbers and increased levels of recruitment (Vulliamy 2010). Critics have observed that the economic crises of the mid-1980s and the late 1990s served to heighten the demand for work, and are seen as persuasive reasons behind the rise in organized crime in Mexico (Grayson 2010; Vulliamy 2010; Langton 2012). Seduced by promises of guaranteed income, new recruits have joined organized crime in Mexico as a way of encountering prosperity quickly. What is more, Mexican cartels have been able to expand their workforce, despite the high risks involved, not only due to the rising levels of unemployment, but also because of the growing increase in the addiction to narcotics. Furthermore, the cartels' successful recruitment has included the incorporation of dissident ex-military personnel, hired primarily as *sicarios* or assassins, valued due to their expertise in warfare and their perceived ruthless nature, as was the case with the founding members of the Zetas cartel. Thus, the competing cartels, locked in a battle over dominance of the main *plazas*, which in turn provide unrivaled access to the main US routes for distribution, have seen the need to increase their numbers in order to keep up with, and measure up against their enemies, leading to an armed struggle. However, as observed above, the Calderón administration's anti-corruption stance has ironically heightened the narco conflict, reshaping the structure and existence of organized crime in Mexico, and blurring the unofficial yet respected codes of conduct maintained between governmental bodies that in the past have acted as pacification agencies of inter-cartel rivalry in response to financial incentives. The individual beneficiaries of this process ultimately corroborate in a form of *pax mafiosa* that Vulliamy (2010) defines as

the Mafia's peace—whereby criminal syndicates know their place with reference to each other, law enforcement knows its place in the same scheme of things, the product keeps flowing, and politicians understand that this kind of quiet comes at a price—protection. A Pax Mafiosa can guarantee the politician votes, and a power base, in return for nothing more than the tranquility of a blind eye at least, or cover for, even adherence to, a particular cartel at best. (18)

Government involvement in a somewhat previously clandestine relationship between organized crime is considered in both films analyzed in this and the next chapter. In *El infierno*, Estrada positions his *capo* at the very epicenter of the town's political and economic life, maintaining a tight-knit relationship with the police force and local government. However, police corruption is focused on in Escalante's *Heli* in the form of a task force undermined by cynicism and a federal agency infiltrated by narco allegiances. As we have seen earlier, media reports and recent investigations into the subject acknowledge the existence of payments offered by the cartels to members of the police force, the judiciary and Federal officials, among other public figures, considered by organized crime as influential agents operating within the nation's main institutions (Hernández 2012; Vulliamy 2010). Both films analyzed in this and the next chapter address these concerns, and in Estrada's fourth film, *La dictadura perfecta* (*The Perfect Dictatorship*) (2014), the accusations of governmental association with organized crime is apparent and rife throughout the narrative. In *La dictadura perfecta*, Estrada extends his criticisms to include media conglomerates, which assist in manipulating public opinion and, therefore, inadvertently control the populace to the point of influencing presidential election results. In *El infierno*, however, allegations of state corruption are directed toward the chief of police, the general patrol squads and the federal agent sent by central government to assist in the fight against organized crime, played by Daniel Giménez Cacho. Implicated also are the mayor of the town, whose political campaign was funded by the cartels in the film, and in an attempt to blur the boundaries of representation between fiction and reality, real-life political figures from the past are accused of fraternizing with the godfathers of Mexico's organized crime in an important scene discussed below.

MEXICO 2010: ESTRADA'S APOCALYPTIC VISION

Estrada's pessimistic view of contemporary Mexico and its narco war is made clear from the outset of the film. The opening sequences frame the protagonist, Benjamín García (Damián Alcázar), or "el Benny" as he is known locally, leaving his mother and young brother at home to venture north, to the United States, in search of work. The narrative then cuts to twenty years later, and Benny is being deported from the United States and is heading back to his maternal lodgings. What Benny encounters during his voyage home is revealing, and sets the stage for the sense of

criminality and anarchy that will continue for the remainder of the narrative. Firstly, he is robbed at gunpoint by a bandit while he is sleeping on the bus, and then strip-searched (and robbed again) at a military check point by an armed soldier. As Benny gazes out of the bus window, he is almost unable to recognize his native land. The camera lingers on the passing images providing a pan shot of the barren landscape and passes a shrine to *santa muerte* (Saintly Death), the appropriated icon of the *narcotraficantes* (narco traffickers).⁶ The image of *santa muerte* stands as a recognizable emblem of the now-termed *narcocultura* (narco culture) that accompanies visual representations of the Mexican drug world. Another important symbol of this emerging subculture can be seen in the rise of the *narcocorridos*, a variation of the traditional Mexican *corrido* or folk song, historically made popular and sung during gatherings at the time of the Revolution (Burgos Dávila 2011). The *narcocorridos* adopt the lyrical form of the *corrido* combined with the norteno musical genre made popular by bands such as *Los Tigres del Norte* and *Los Tucanes de Tijuana*. *Narcocorridos* have gained momentum in terms of popularity both in Mexico and in the United States of recent years, and have captured the imagination of fans since the lyrics contain stories of benign outlaws struggling against an aggressively hostile and vengeful world (Vulliamy 2010). Estrada acknowledges this cultural phenomenon through his use of the selected non-diegetic music in the text, which features the performance of the band *Los Tucanes de Tijuana*. Furthermore, the director includes a specially commissioned *narcocorrido* in the film, the lyrics of which pay homage to “el Diablo,” the fallen fictional cartel member who is also Benny’s younger brother in the text. The *narcocorrido* phenomenon, and its incorporation into the wider spectrum of Mexican popular culture, indicates a growing interest in productions emerging from the *narcocultura*, exemplifying the accessibility of these vernacular cultural manifestations aimed at mainstream consumption.

Returning to my analysis of the opening scenes in the film, acres of barren wasteland are framed from the viewpoint of Benny’s incredulous eyes as we pass almost ghost town living spaces, which have been emptied of their male inhabitants, lost to either the United States or the ongoing narco war. Once Benjamín arrives, he learns that his younger brother has been killed and gunned down “como un perro” (like a dog) and that poverty continues to pervade, if not worsen, in his native town. When Benjamín goes in search of work at his *padrino*’s garage in the neighboring (and ironically named) town, San Miguel del (N)Arcángel, he learns

firsthand of the extent of the violence inflicted upon its inhabitants constituting “el pan nuestro de cada día” (our daily bread). Unaccustomed to witnessing brutal murders in the middle of the street and in broad daylight, Benjamín eventually learns of the magnitude of the drug problem that has held his town to ransom. Through the advice and information provided by his *padrino* (played by the actor Salvador Sánchez), who reveals the increasing despair suffered by Mexicans facing “crisis, desempleo, violencia” (crisis, unemployment, violence), Benjamín begins to grapple with the extremity of the current social (dis)order. This perspective highlights the underlying criticism that shapes the narrative stance, and is articulated in the film’s tagline, “Nada que celebrar” (nothing to celebrate), referring to the bicentenary celebrations being held at the time of the film’s premiere (Vértiz de la Fuente 2010, 5)⁷ (Fig. 4.1).

In the film, Benjamín’s *padrino* notes that the narco war has claimed more lives than the Revolution, which serves as a reminder of the significance of the film’s year of making. At the time of the film’s release, Mexico was commemorating not only 200 years of independence, but also marking the centenary anniversary of the Revolution. Both of these pinnacle moments in Mexico’s past have played crucial roles in the trajectory of nation-building, and are referred to in the film as a means through which a reflection on the current state of the country is achieved. Estrada deliberately rebuffs the official call for celebration and questions the need to glorify a national condition which appears to be in the process of socioeconomic self-destruction (Jordán 2010, 11). The final scenes in the film, which see Benjamín infiltrating the bicentenary celebrations at the local town (now officially run by the cartel) in order to annihilate the whole governing clan and put an end to not only their existence, but also the commemoration of a national historic moment, constitute stark critiques of the perceived status quo outlined by the filmic text. The context and setting for this slaughter, however, has resonances with a real-life event which significantly affected Estrada when reading about it in the national press (López 2010). The bicentenary day killings in Estrada’s film recall the Independence Day murders in Morelia orchestrated by La Familia cartel in 2008, when one of its members disrupted the festivities taking place by throwing a hand grenade into the reveling crowd, who were gathered in the town square to hear *el Grito*, the traditional cry of freedom conducted every year to mark independence. Estrada has since described such events as constituting a form of “terrorismo contra la población civil” (terrorism against civic society) compelling him to acknowledge this



Fig. 4.1 Film poster of *El infierno* (2010)

incident in the film, only altering the victims of violence from civilians to the cartel members and their cronies (López 2010, 40).

El infierno thus highlights the chaos reigning in the fictional northern town of San Miguel del (N)Arcángel, a microcosm of the border regions of Mexico, while also attempting to delve into some of the reasoning behind the increase in violence and the social problems that have led the

nation to its current state. As Benjamín's *padrino* notes, the country finds itself in the worst social condition in recent modern history. But tellingly he intuits, "en este país uno no hace lo que quiere, sino lo que puede" (in this country one does not do what one wants, but what one can), and in the process introduces the spectator to the reality behind the increase in cartel activity and recruitment. As Benjamín's childhood friend, Cochiloco, acknowledges, he and others would not be part of the narcotics business if alternative employment opportunities existed, condemning the state of contemporary Mexico as "infernal."⁸ Despite the ill-fated perspective of the film however, Estrada maintains a satirical note, underlining his narrative with dark humor, which in turns provides an element of distance in the spectator who is confronted with scenes of extreme violence on the screen. Bearing in mind the various discourses concerning the nature of satire, Dustin Griffin (1994) argues that satire is problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures it offers (5). These characteristics are ones that can be found to shape the narrative of *El infierno*, the ending of which remains inconclusive. In line with Griffin's observations, the film's approach to the violence taking place is ambiguous, with the political rhetoric underlying the narrative being almost prescriptive in form, and providing little engagement on possible solutions to the problem. The use of satire, a technique highly favored by Estrada in his political films, allows the filmmaker to criticize the current state of the nation in an ambiguously light-hearted manner.⁹ Thus, the satirical framework employed in the film provides the emotional distance which is awarded through laughter, and in turn processes the digestion of otherwise disturbing images. This notion is made more dramatic through the acknowledgment of the reality contained in the violent scenes depicted in the film, which constitute a replica of the daily media coverage during Calderón's *sexenio*. Estrada carefully selects details and events which are incorporated into the film that relate to historical realities, and include named cartel leaders, recorded incidents of public violence, accusations of corruption and implications of political appeasement with the cartels, elements that are recognizable to audiences in Mexico, now familiar with these revelations from daily reporting in the press. The first of Estrada's satirical endeavors is seen in his portrayal of the fictional cartel members themselves, and their leaders, the rivaling brothers, Don José and Don Pancho Reyes. In the film, the Reyes brothers once ran the "Reyes del

Norte” cartel, but after a family dispute regarding inheritance, Don Pancho broke alliance with Don José and formed his own cartel, under the name of “Los Panchos”. Both cartels are now locked in a bitter struggle for supremacy and governance of the *plaza*, leading to violent confrontations and twofold taunting. Within this fictional context of sibling rivalry, Estrada points toward the fragmentation of several important real-life cartels in Mexico which has exacerbated the violence experienced in contemporary society.¹⁰ He further satirizes the motives of these fictional confrontations in his film by observing the almost ludicrous nature of the Reyes’ feuding, which reaches barbaric extremes.

MEXICAN ORGANIZED CRIME ON THE SCREEN

Estrada’s narco conflict is derived of factions of feuding family members, which acknowledges in its structure, the existence of several cartels that constitute the main players in Mexico’s drug wars. From the outset, the reference to the now-disbanded Familia michoacana, a cartel founded by the late charismatic leader, Nazario Moreno González, also known as “El más loco” (the Craziest One), is perhaps the most obvious narrative parallel made with the Reyes clan and its leader Don José. At the time of Estrada’s filming of *El infierno*, La Familia maintained prime position within the nation’s press coverage of the drugs crisis. They were once a well-known and much-feared cartel operating in the then president Calderón’s home region of Michoacán. La Familia came out in full force, and entered the public domain, and thus its imaginary thereon, with an outward display of defiant machismo which appeared laced with a sense of performance. On September 6, 2006, twenty masked men entered a discotheque and disposed of five decapitated heads across the dance floor, accompanied by the message “La Familia does not kill for money. It does not kill for women. It does not kill the innocent. Only those who deserve to die. Know this is divine justice” (Vulliamy 2010, 18). The evidence of decapitations, displayed in public spaces as symbols of supremacy by the perpetrators, has become a common visual marker of narco violence, and remains a means for instilling terror in the public. The presence of decapitations, hangings and dismembered bodies is addressed in the films analyzed in this and the next chapter, with the public display of tortured corpses as a sign of domination and control. The mundanity of violence in modern-day Mexico, gripped in the throes of a so-called narco war, and the subsequent question of its perpetration in ethical terms, is a matter for

discussion in Chap. 5, when my focus will turn to address the implications of a torture scene as explored in *Heli*.

Through his observations on the inner workings of Los Reyes del Norte and their ongoing feud with Los Panchos, Estrada gives us an overview of the structure and motivations behind a fictional cartel with relevance to sociohistorical events and organizations. On a much smaller scale, Estrada traces the cartel hierarchies from the lower-ranking *halcones*, to the assassins or *sicarios*, seen in the characters of Benjamín and Cochiloco, all the way to the godfathers, embodied in the image of Don Pancho, Don José and his wife, and their son, Jesús Reyes, also known as JR. Also traced here are the beneficiaries of the cartel's favor, seen in the images of the official figures of authority, once again revealed to be from the lowest ranking order, all the way to the top of the political and ecclesiastical ladder (Fig. 4.2).

Moreover, Estrada satirizes those who profit from the cartel's lavish gifts and donations in exchange for silence or collaboration. Some examples of these are seen in the characters of El Benny's mother and his



Fig. 4.2 El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) and Benny (Damián Alcázar) having their guns blessed by the local clergyman. Still from *El infierno* (2010)

padrino, both initially critical of the cartels and their wealth, accumulated through illegal and violent means, only to receive donations gratefully in the form of a new garage and household items from Benjamín, at the same time ignoring the origins of their newly accrued gifts. Such accusations provide Estrada with a medium through which to critique those who profit from the cartel's seeming generosity, demonstrated through his portrayal of the inhabitants of San Miguel del (N)Arcángel, which is graced with new buildings and a school, obtained through illegal funds. The act of donating to social causes, however, is not exclusive to current Mexican cartel leaders. Documented old-fashioned cartel leaders, bound by moral codes and a sense of social duty, allegedly were made famous for their philanthropic activities, shrouding their legacy with a mythical Robin Hood-like status within the public imaginary.¹¹ Furthermore, binding codes of conduct existent within the cartel's sense of purpose are explored in the film, particularly in the scene when El Benny is introduced to Don José, as the former arrives in search of employment. Here Don José embodies the traditional cartel prototype, whose decisions are determined by loosely defined moral codes of behavior, which include "honestidad, honradez cabal y silencio" (honesty, upright honor and silence) harking to a past era of mutual governing, understanding and bought loyalties. In a scene that outlines the values held by Don José, and establishes the characters and their relationship to one another, Estrada sketches the emergence of what will become a clash of ideals between the cartel leader and his son and heir, el JR, a less-favorable character. Through this binary Estrada establishes what has become acknowledged as the changing nature of organized crime in Mexico, from a time when *patrones* ruled their cartels in a business-like manner, demanding loyalty and respect from their members, while maintaining a privileged position of power and respect in society, to the current conflict of ideals, where a constructed sense of morality and discretion is offset against narcissism and avarice, in what becomes translated into external displays of brutality and performed notions of masculinity. In a scene of vital importance in the film, a still-naïve Benny arrives with Cochiloco to meet "el patrón," Don José. This same patrón, as it is revealed during this establishing scene, constitutes a *ranchero* at heart, a cowboy who continues to tend to his herd every morning. This description, however, remains close to the truth in the case of a number of established and old-fashioned cartels, who were known to be cowboys primarily, and kept their illegal activities out of sight in order to avoid unwanted attention (Miller 1991). Don José emphasizes the

need for discretion “en este negocio” (in this business) and retorts Cochiloco and his coworkers for “andar presumiendo por ahí” (going about showing off), since their showy attire and boastful behavior makes them easy targets and likely to draw unwanted attention. However, through Don José’s statement above, Estrada points toward a “new” prototype of cartel members, seen in the image of the flash, conceited and supremely machista young narcos, often termed *Los juniors*, predominant among the Tijuana cartel (Vulliamy 2010). The perceived glamorous lifestyle of *Los juniors* has captured the imagination of soap opera narratives and inspired a number of *narcocorridos* alike. Don José’s son JR, therefore, is both a semantic and a personified reference to this new type of *narco*, exemplified through his eye-catching attire, eccentric sense of self-importance and ruthless, almost sadistic nature. The character of JR, therefore, encapsulates a new line of criminals within the current context of narco violence.

One of the most important accusatory scenes in the film commences with the arrival of Cochiloco and El Benny at Don José’s ranch named “El rinconcito del cielo” (Little Corner of Heaven), a parodic reference outlining the ironic nature of Don José’s little piece of paradise, a money-laundered product enabled through his involvement in extortion, violence and the trading of illegal substances. As Cochiloco and El Benny walk through the marble-floored corridor leading to the meeting place in Don José’s elaborately decorated study, El Benny’s clumsy state of awe is juxtaposed against Cochiloco’s words of caution. But it is not until El Benny is left to admire his new surroundings that Estrada’s staunchest politically aimed criticism takes place. In a scene where the film’s most radical reproaches are made, El Benny’s naiveté serves as a vehicle through which Estrada highlights what he perceives to be the core fundamental flaws of Mexico’s political system. On the wall are framed photographic replicas of Don José and his wife, Doña Mari (played by María Rojo), in the company of the most recent lineup of past presidents. As El Benny gazes, the camera zooms in on the smiling images of the cartel couple in the close company of ex-presidents Miguel de la Madrid, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Ernesto Zedillo, and Vicente Fox accompanied by his wife Marta Sahagún, both of whom have been mentioned earlier in this chapter.

These accusations of corruption at the very highest level challenge the political rhetoric driving the official stance on the drug war, particularly since the PAN, the governing party at the time of Estrada’s filming, is also accused of partaking in friendships with the cartels in this scene,

represented in the smiling image of Vicente Fox, who is framed posing with Don José and his wife. Neither are past PRI governments spared the wrath of Estrada's accusatory lens—evidenced by his visual focusing on past presidents Miguel de la Madrid, Ernesto Zedillo and Salinas de Gortari. Furthermore, as we have seen elsewhere in this book, the Salinas de Gortari brothers, as has been alleged, benefitted personally from an informal arrangement with organized crime. Despite reporting in the media, and numerous investigative works published on the narco wars, until *El infierno*, Mexican cinema remained reluctant to point the finger of blame at past presidential regimes, or, at least, not quite so openly as Estrada has done with his third film. Accustomed to instigating cinematic criticism of abuses of power, Estrada with his first and second films *La ley de Herodes* (1999) and *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006), respectively, set about critiquing political figures and their actions on the screen, in a manner which until then, had not been conducted quite so openly. As we have seen elsewhere in this study, Mexican cinema's relationship with the state and the area of political representation has been a contentious one in its history. As I explored in the first two chapters of this book, it was not until the end of the 1990s when national filmmaking was able to venture onto the terrain of direct political critiquing, a subject matter that had previously been taboo to filmmakers, with the threat of *enlatamiento*.

In addition to poking fun at political figures in *El infierno*, with his film Estrada ridicules the narcos' luxurious lifestyle and presents their tastes as stylistically kitsch. Don José's study is filled with trophies of his achievements: as a hunter, as an art collector, as a family man and as a *ranchero* (cowboy). He has won awards for his cattle, hangs a portrait of his family on the wall and demonstrates a penchant for the art of taxidermy. The lack of sophistication within his environment is one that stands out visually in this scene, in an attempt to undermine the cartel's thirst for material wealth, framing these moments of interaction between the characters with subverted ironic interludes. This scene in Don José's study also serves to introduce the whole cartel family to the spectator, while outlining the dynamics between its members. Important for us to observe is the portrayal of the father and son relationship in the film, both of whom are standing on opposite sides of the political spectrum in relation to their opinions on the United States' role in the drug wars. Don José blames the United States for the current state of affairs, and reproaches Mexican politicians for appeasing the whims of their northern neighbors. There are references made in this scene to what Don José perceives as the failure of

NAFTA, which he connects with the current narco crisis. JR, however, challenges his father's views, by reminding him that "los gringos" are "nuestros mejores clientes" (our most valued clients) once again pointing toward the paradoxical position held by the United States in terms of the narco crisis, and its position as main supplier of armaments to organized crime. Such opposing views lead to a scuffle between father and son in the film, symbolic of the changing nature of the Mexican cartel trade and their values, seen as a struggle between the old-style *patrón* and the new, ambitious and less honor-bound *junior*. What is perhaps interesting in this scene is the introduction of the role of women within the cartel world, conducted through the character of María Rojo. Here we are provided with an imagining of the narco matriarch, through her interpretation of Doña Mari, the wife and mother of the two opposing generational members of the cartel (Fig. 4.3).

The role of women acting as cartel leaders has fascinated the press over the last decade, and their rise as important players within the world of trafficking has captured the imagination of soap operas and *narcocorridos*



Fig. 4.3 Doña Mari Reyes (María Rojo), Don José Reyes (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) and JR (Mauricio Isaac) form the Reyes Cartel. Still from *El infierno*

alike. Anel Violeta Noriega Ríos, also known as “La Chula” or the Beautiful, formerly of *La familia michoacana* cartel, is one example of this phenomenon. Currently serving a prison sentence, during her time as a cartel member Anel Violeta Noriega Ríos held a high-ranking position within the organization, and acted as the main liaison between *La Familia michoacana* and the Sinaloa cartels (Adams 2012). In the realms of fiction, the popular *La Reina del Sur* (*The Queen of the South*) has inspired ballads written in her honor, and is currently a successful *telenovela* (soap opera) of the same name; her image providing spectators and readers with the glamorized prototype of the female narco leader (Lippman 2005). The problematics arising from this concept are twofold. Women fulfill a dual role within the Mexican world of drug trafficking; either they are represented as glamorous and feared cartel leaders in their own right (and their sense of femininity is emphasized and overtly played out, as with the case of *La Reina del Sur*) or they act as trophies of macho achievement seen in the cases of a number of beauty pageant contestants who have become embroiled in the narco world and have met brutal ends following cartel rivalry and disputes, as explored in Gerardo Naranjo’s *Miss Bala* (2011). Estrada’s matriarch, Doña Mari, however, plays out the role of the female cartel leader, a strong and dominant female force in the midst of a macho world. She is just as ruthless as her husband, seen when she demands revenge for the death of her son, and she is just as ambitious as Don José himself. Doña Mari, in the scene analyzed above, through her actions of reprising and challenging Don José for his treatment of JR is publicly undermining not only his word, but also his masculinity. By subverting Don José’s sense of masculine supremacy in this scene, Estrada is thus calling into question the constructed sense of masculinity played out by cartel leaders which relies upon outward displays of machismo, and acts of violence as performative counternarratives (Vulliamy 2010, 286). Thus, Don José and Don Pancho attempt to outdo one another in scenes of taunting aggression, with Don José challenging his brother, “[a ver] quién la tiene más grande” (who has the biggest [penis]), reducing the disproportionate levels of violence effectively to a phallogocentric battle of macho wills.

Overall, Estrada’s use of satire, and an apparent comedic superficiality, belies an astute awareness of the agencies of power at play within the drug crisis at the time of the film’s making and of the complex infrastructures of the world of organized crime. His use of parody in representing these key players within the narco conflict offers a forum for both laughter and reflection upon the often contradictory context of the drug wars engulfing

Mexico. By providing an insight into the internal disputes, structures and misdemeanors of a fictional cartel, Estrada offers his viewers an invested contextual problem that draws from historical realities as conceived of at the height of the drug wars. However, although the film's main aim is to critique the current hardships of the Mexican national condition through his satirizing of an otherwise infernal context, the film fails to explore fully the problem in an intellectually engaged manner. Instead, *El infierno* chooses to rely on black humor as an outlet for rage and the condemnation of a corrupt state and its legitimate agencies portrayed through a populist discourse. Neither does the film allow for a multidimensional analysis of its characters, choosing instead to rely on melodramatic performances that at times are borderline caricatures. Estrada's portrayal of the narco war and its effects could not be more different to Escalante's harrowing psychological exploration of violence and the context of disposable lives, as we shall see in the next chapter of this book. In this sense, Escalante positions individual turmoil amid an environment of ongoing and unsystematic conflict that lacks clearly defined spatial parameters and exposes deeply flawed objectives. The result is an infernal condition mirroring Estrada's depiction of Mexico in the midst of a drug-related war, yet the narrative formula moves away from the satirical perspective, and instead offers a bleak and uncompromising view of the position of the victim which is firmly placed at the core of theoretical speculation.

NOTES

1. See, for example, films such as *El efecto tequila* (*The Tequila Effect*), *La ley de Herodes*, *Amores perros*, *Y tu mamá también*, *Un mundo maravilloso*, and *Conejo en la luna*.
2. As this book goes to press, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) won the 2018 presidential elections with 53% of the votes.
3. *Toalla gate* (towelgate) refers to the Mexican presidential expenses controversy of 2001, first reported by the newspaper *Milenio*. It has since been recalled as a political scandal that involved expenditures on the residence of Vicente Fox, where, it was claimed, that embroidered towels to the value of \$400 each had been purchased alongside other luxury items in a refurbishment project of two rooms. The affair caused severe embarrassment to the Fox administration, since the president had promised during his election campaign to run an austere government, without the excessive luxuries of past governments. The scandal resulted in the resignations of Carlos Rojas, the head of the presidential acquisitions committee, and at least three members of Rojas' staff. (BBC 2001).

4. At the time of writing, Oswaldo Zavala's excellent book *Los cartels no existen: Narcotráfico y cultura en México* (2018) had yet to be published.
5. At the time of writing, El Chapo's arrest in 2014 had just been announced, following from his second escape from prison. See Archibold and Thompson (2014).
6. *La Santa Muerte* phenomenon originated in the poor neighborhood of Tepito in Mexico City, where followers seeking protection visit the shrine to pay their respects.
7. Mexico's bicentenary Celebrations aimed to mark the 200 since independence. It was commemorated with state-sponsored cultural events.
8. Here Estrada has chosen to name one of his characters after a real-life drug trafficker, Manuel Salcido Uzeta, also known as *Cochiloco* (Crazy Pig) because of his flying rages. The real Cochiloco was gunned down in Guadalajara in 1991.
9. The other two films are *La ley de Herodes* (1999) and *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006). At the time of writing, Estrada completed a fourth film, as postscript to the trilogy, which also starred Damián Alcázar in the lead role, entitled *La dictadura perfecta* (2014).
10. Recent developments in Mexico's narco wars have acknowledged the fragmentation and redesigning of the more established and older cartels. For example, the Juárez cartel repositioned itself and has a faction known as "La Línea". Similarly, the "Zetas" were once recruited as the military branch of the Gulf cartel, until the former broke ranks to establish its own cartel following the arrest of Osiel Cárdenas, then leader of the Gulf cartel. For further reading, see BBC (2011) and Vulliamy (2010: 9–22).
11. The real-life narco, Manuel Salcido Uzeta, also known as *Cochiloco*, lived in a ranch and was thought among the locals to be an engineer named Pedro Orozco García. Orozco García was a well-respected rancher, who donated generously to local causes and entertained the chief of police, the mayor and other local dignitaries at his home. He also rode his horse during Independence Day Parades and managed to conceal the fact that he was Mexico's most wanted drug lord from those who knew him as Orozco. He was shot dead in 1991, by, it is suspected, a Colombian cartel (Miller 1991).

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Drug Violence and Narco Wars Part II: Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013)

A mí no me deberían preguntarme si con esta película estoy creando una imagen negativa del país, más bien deberían preguntárselo a todos aquellos que han hecho que así este México. Yo sólo reflejo [en mis películas] lo que veo y me inspiro en lo que vivimos día a día.

I should not be asked if I am creating a negative image of the country with this film, in fact, that question should be directed at those who have made of Mexico how it currently is. I only reflect [in my films] what I see, and I am inspired from how we live on a day to day basis.

Amat Escalante (Calderón 2013, 2)

Having observed some of the sociohistorical factors that contribute toward the Mexican narco crisis, in Chap. 4, where an examination of Luis Estrada's *El infierno* was provided, this chapter will continue my discussions on the issue of the drug war in Mexican cinema. As we saw in my previous discussions, Estrada's film offers an early example of Mexican cinema's attempts to make sense of the violence and conflict that followed the government's so-called declaration of war upon the cartel world in 2006. Equally, *El infierno* epitomizes Estrada's treatment of a troubling and pertinent subject matter explored through the comedic lens, an approach that he continues in his fourth film, *La dictadura perfecta* (2014). *La dictadura perfecta* is set in the time of its release, 2014, and depicts a chaotic and violent society held to ransom by the actions of

increasingly brazen and corrupt government agencies that do business with the cartels and use the media conglomerates to their political advantage. The release date for *La dictadura perfecta*, and its development in terms of the portrayal of the violent crisis, contextualizes a narco-torn world where a sense of impunity has become magnified. Estrada's fourth film perhaps aligns itself more critically with Amat Escalante's disquieting observations on the nature of conflict and its effect on the victim in modern Mexican society, seen in his third feature, *Heli* (2013). With *Heli*, Escalante positions the role of the victim at the center of his analysis of the narco problem, and, by doing so, engages in a dynamic of representation that embraces the concerns governing a notion of victimhood and political audibility, as reflected in a number of other recent cultural productions that examine the human cost of the war on drugs.¹ Although not focusing on one specific cartel, the events in *Heli* are governed by the consequences of the narco conflict, which act as a catalyst for the incidents that figuratively tear the family apart. This same external conflict, embodied in the war on drugs, constitutes a backdrop to what otherwise is conceived of as a mundane family life. In the film, the family continues to live their lives in an unassuming manner, tending to their daily chores and work duties, preoccupied by their individual woes that combine relationship and financial concerns. The external conflict taking place between the cartels and the state barely affects their daily activities, and holds little interest for the family itself, until circumstance changes their routines and lives forever. The fragility of their existence is evident when cartel violence penetrates the domestic realm, and takes hostage several of the family members. The event marks a shift in the narrative pace and tone, exposing the extent of the violent social environment in which the family live, and the precarious nature of their lives. However, until the kidnapping takes place, Heli and his loved ones pay little attention to the events unfolding in their region. Evidence of this can be seen in the screened news reports that the family watch with indifference on the television, where we view the state's carefully choreographed victory campaigns, involving the federal forces taking prime position as performers of justice, which is confirmed through public announcements. These moments of military and state victory over organized crime are publicly and theatrically acted out in front of media representatives and their cameras, framing the rows of diligent soldiers who are passing on bundles of cocaine, DVDs and other items of contraband destined for the televised bonfire.

THE NARCO FILM GENRE

Forming part of a growing corpus of cinematic work that addresses the topic of organized crime in Mexico, *Heli* stands out as different to what has become the norm in terms of a glamorized depiction of the conflict. Since Estrada's film, a growing number of films both in Mexico and in the United States have emerged, which focus on depicting a fictional account of life during the war on drugs. Differing in aims, and with a variety of narrative creations, the narco film genre has grown in popularity and in productive number. *Heli*, however, differs from most of these representations for a number of reasons. Unlike Gerardo Naranjo's *Miss Bala* (2011), for example, which also did very well on the festival circuit, in *Heli* there are no repeated scenes of a feminine beauty being used as pawn in the midst of conflicting gang members. The protagonist in Naranjo's film unwittingly (and rather questioningly) is spared physical violation and death, due to her collaboration with the drug dealers, a luxury that is not afforded to Estela in *Heli*, by contrast. In this context, and at the hands of her kidnappers, the female body is converted into a commodity that bears the brunt of male frustrations and becomes a disposable object following sexual gratification. Furthermore, careful scrutiny of the Mexican cartel's processing of transportation and production of illegal merchandise debunks Naranjo's cinematic interpretation of organized crime as a frenzied and chaotic group of bandits using an unwitting young woman to their advantage. That same year, Beto Gómez released his *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (Saving Private Pérez) (2011), a satirical take on the image of the drug lord, where the director decontextualizes the familiar Mexican landscapes and replaces these with a war-torn Middle Eastern setting instead. In *Salvando al soldado Pérez*, the protagonist embarks on a rescue mission to save his brother who is serving as a US soldier. Although compared by some critics with *El infierno*, *Salvando al soldado Pérez* bears little resemblance to Estrada's third film, aside from the satirical framework of its narrative. A year later, the lesser-known and low-budget film, *Los niños del narco*, directed by José Luis Vera Alamillo (2012), was released with limited circulation. With *Los niños del narco* Vera Alamillo provides an interesting exploration of the sociological outcome of the drug trade's territorial expansion. And in particular, he pays attention to the effect that organized crime has on the rural local economy and on the family unit. In Vera Alamillo's film, young children are separated from their parents and are taken from their homes in order to work for the drug lords on the

marijuana and poppy plantations. The film explores how depravation, a lack of education, and the constant threat of sexual assault condemn the younger generation from the rural areas to a life of social isolation and crime. Along with the growing trend in narco-related cultural productions, these films, like their telenovela counterparts, contribute toward a constructed imaginary in relation to the world of illegal narcotics trade. The presence of organized crime and its influence on Mexican society, however, has existed in the industry since before the recent boom pertaining to the narco film genre. We see evidence of this, for example, in Robert Rodríguez's *El mariachi* (1992), where the director acknowledges the problem of organized crime operating in Mexico, and in Carlos Carrera's *El crimen del padre Amaro* (2003) there features a prominent cartel leader who dominates the village and has direct access to its most politically influential people. However, rather than focusing in detail on these figures of organized crime, the aforementioned films simply recognize their existence in Mexican society without really critically engaging with the problem. Set in a pre-drug war context, the cartels in these films are portrayed as underground syndicates that contribute toward a black market economy. These cartels, furthermore, reap the financial rewards of the drug trade, and share their good fortune with the local community through the occasional philanthropic activity, as we see in *El crimen del padre Amaro*, for example.

AMAT ESCALANTE'S *HELI*

Receiving its world premiere at Cannes, *Heli* was entered for the Palme d'Or and won Escalante the Best Director category in 2013, an accolade that would seal the film's future festival success and secure its global distribution. In Mexico, the film was well received, and critics, such as Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez in the periodical *Reforma*, praised the film for its "elocuencia con la que retrata la desolación mexicana" (eloquence, with which it depicts the sense of Mexican desolation) (2013, 12), while Rafael Aviña notes that "[en] raras ocasiones el cine mexicano ha alcanzado ese nivel de acercamiento – distanciamiento con un tema que ahoga al país entero" (rarely has Mexican cinema reached such proximity – distance to a topic that suffocates the whole nation) (2012, 3). Escalante's film follows the story of Heli (Armando Espitia), a young father, who is married to Sabrina (Linda Gonzalez) and with whom he has a young infant. The



Fig. 5.1 Estela (Andrea Vergara). Film still from *Heli* (2013)

couple lives in a modest home with Heli's father and his younger sister, Estela (Andrea Vergara) (Fig. 5.1).

Estela is romantically involved with a young cadet named Beto (Juan Eduardo Palacios), with whom she spends most of her time outside of the family home. Although Beto is seventeen and twelve-year-old Estela is still a minor attending school, little attention is paid to this relationship by her family, aside from Sabrina's cautionary advice not to fall pregnant. Estela's father does not seem overly concerned with his young daughter's courtship, and although he is aware that Estela spends time with an unknown young man, the exhaustion incurred from working long hours at the car factory seems to leave him with little energy at the end of each shift. It is not until Heli spots Beto on the roof of the family home, secretly speaking with Estela in the middle of the night, and urging her to hide the two parcels of cocaine that he has stolen from wayward federal officers, that action is taken against Estela, and she is confined to her room. Her punishment does not last long, however, since it takes less than twenty-four hours for uniformed armed men to break into the house, shoot and kill

Heli's father, and then swiftly kidnap Estela and her brother in retribution for their indirect involvement in the stolen cocaine. The journey conducted in the dark of the night with the kidnappers is framed in a claustrophobic and tense manner. Once having arrived, and Heli and Beto are handed over by the uniformed men to the trained *sicarios*, whose mission it is to torture, maim and dispose of troublesome individuals, Estela and her kidnappers disappear in the SUV to an unknown location.

In retrospect it appears that the adults' neglectful position in relation to Estela is partially to blame for the tragedy that befalls them. It is precisely because Estela is left to her own devices that she is able to embark on this courtship at an early age, and with such dramatic consequences. During the family scenes, we see how little attention is paid to the young woman. Estela cuts a solitary figure as she sits alone in the family kitchen completing her homework at 1 am, when Heli returns home for his meal break during the night shift. In this context, her elder brother appears to be the only character that shows any concern for Estela's welfare and progress at school; filling in the emotional void left by the weary father figure. We also notice how Estela plays truant at school so as to maximize the time spent with Beto. For the most part, Beto and Estela's liaison is relatively innocent, still in the throes of pubescent love and gentle, clumsy desire. We know that they have not had sexual relations since Estela worries about falling pregnant. This makes the resulting effect of what happens to Estela later in the film even more poignant. Beto has proposed marriage, which she has accepted, and the young couple plan to elope. These plans are made away from the adult world, and without their knowledge or consent. What we see in the film is a disintegration of family values, where the unit is fragmented and isolated, and members of the household dwell on their individual woes, keeping any meaningful communication with one another to a minimum. This idea is also apparent in Escalante's earlier work, *Los bastardos* (*The Bastards*) (2008) and *Sangre* (*Blood*) (2005), where both films offer an equally distorted vision of broken family ties, and expose a visually unflinching violent social context. The individual sense of isolation in *Heli* is explored through several of its main characters; Sabrina, for example, is withholding from intimate relations with Heli because she feels resentful of the fact that she had to leave her family in Durango to be with her new husband. Heli, in turn, feels rejected and emotionally isolated from his wife, all the while acting as the head of the household, tending to his sister's care and stepping into the shoes of his emotionally

disenchanted and frequently absent father. However, despite this unpromising start, the family members will find their way back toward one another as a consequence of the traumatic event they experience. We see how Heli and Sabrina reconnect both emotionally and physically after she comforts him during a moment of grief. A bereaved Heli places his head on his wife's lap and allows for his sorrow to manifest itself through his muffled tears, displaying a vulnerability that until then had not been seen in his character. And as if to mimic this scene, later in the film, when a now-mute Estela has returned, she too places her head on Heli's lap, seeking solace from the traumatic memories that haunt her. Both of these scenes form a dialogic relationship with one another, and one that speaks of reconciliation, family ties and, crucially, of hope. It was important for Escalante to end his film with a sense of hope, even if this idea developed organically during filming (Fig. 5.2).



Fig. 5.2 Estela in one of the final scenes of the film. Still from *Heli*

In an interview with online magazine *Sound and Colours*, Escalante reflects:

The last scene of the movie was not in the screenplay. That happened there in that moment; I saw it and thought that it would be interesting as an ending. We shot the last scripted scene afterwards, and it did feel like much more of a closed ending, but somehow this scene said much more for me. The audience sees a young girl who is holding a young baby in her arms, and she is pregnant, carrying another baby. There is a sense of new life and a sense that the only hope for the future lies with the young. That's why *Heli* focuses on young people. I suppose if you're an optimist, there's hope to be found in that scene, and if you're a pessimist, there's not. In that way it's ambiguous. But this ending spoke to me personally; after watching it, I felt a sense of hope. (Blyth 2014)

In a sociopolitical context of ongoing war and economic instability, it was significant for Escalante to return to the strength of human emotional ties, and to represent these as signifiers of hope for a better future (Fig. 5.3).

So despite the atrocities the family endures (the family here indirectly represents the Mexican nation), the tragedy that Heli and his loved ones suffer serves to bond them together, and allows for a sense of survival to take place.



Fig. 5.3 Heli (Armando Espitia) and Sabrina (Linda González) in a scene from the film

THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE

I mentioned above the violent nature of Escalante's earlier films, *Los bastardos*, and *Sangre*, both of which offer explicit scenes of mindless slaughter. *Heli*, however, although exposing the ruthless nature of the drug war and its senseless killing, nevertheless resists indulging in scenes of hyperbolic violence. Instead, we are presented with a torture scene that has divided critics and spectators alike, and intrigues the viewer due to the paradoxical ordinariness of its nature. It is precisely because the violence in the film is conducted in such a mundane fashion that renders the torture sequence in *Heli* all the more shocking. Carlos Bonfil (2013) in his review of the film for *La Jornada* comments that *Heli* demonstrates the process of:

el horror vuelto costumbre. Con señoras cocinando indiferentes a pocos metros de una sala de tortura, o niños combinando el placer del videojuego violento con las rutinas de un dolor infligido sin saber por qué, ni a quién, ni hasta cuándo.

(horror turned customary. Where women are cooking indifferently, only a few metres away from the torture chamber, or children combine the pleasure of violent video games with the routines of inflicted pain without knowing why or upon whom or until when) (9).

Moreover, revealing what Hannah Arendt defined as the “terribly and terrifyingly normal” context of the event, the men and children involved in the torture scene in *Heli* are shown to be merely following instructions.² Whether this involves their passive observation, or active encouragement, or physical engagement with the acts of torture, the most violent episode in the film is carried out with a sobering amount of normality. However, what is crucial to our understanding of the banality of this evil in question is that its perpetrators conduct their business without *thinking* about their actions or their consequences.³ The *sicarios* and their helpers, as depicted in the film, merely constitute important cogs in the wheels of the tightly structured cartel syndicates, lacking intellectual curiosity, philosophical reflection or remorse. In this context, we are drawn to the Arendtian question in relation to Eichmann's condition of thoughtlessness and his role in the organization of the Holocaust, where the author ponders “[c]ould the activity of thinking as such [...] be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?” (Arendt 1971, 160). What we see in *Heli* is a thoughtless process of disengagement with the consequences of determined actions.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the execution of torture, as exemplified in Escalante's film, is this lack of insight on behalf of the aggressors, or perhaps, more importantly, their lack of critical analysis of the context at hand. For these men, Beto is merely an inconvenient object to be destroyed and disposed of, and in the case of Heli, he constitutes what Felipe Calderón's administration once termed as "collateral damage" pertaining to the drug war (Steinberg 2011). In an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, Judith Butler (2011) summarizes Arendt's explorations of systemic violence, where she asserts that "by calling a crime against humanity 'banal', she [Arendt] was trying to point to the way in which the crime had become for the criminals accepted, routinised, and implemented without moral revulsion and political indignation and resistance." Butler further explains that what "had become banal—and astonishingly so—was the failure to think. Indeed, at one point the failure to think is precisely the name of the crime that Eichmann commits" (2011). Exploring further the issues that arise from this concept, Butler poses the question:

is thinking to be understood as a psychological process or, indeed, something that can be properly described, or is thinking in Arendt's sense always an exercise of judgment of some kind, and so implicated in a normative practice. If the "I" who thinks is part of a "we" and if the "I" who thinks is committed to sustaining that 'we', how do we understand the relation between 'I' and 'we' and what specific implications does thinking imply for the norms that govern politics and, especially, the critical relation to positive law? (Butler 2011)

Butler's assertion would seem to address the wider problematic in relation to violence in Mexico, and the question of collective responsibility, in addition to a sense of accountability in the perpetration of crime. What is troubling in the case of the Mexican drug war is the escalating level of fatalities, and the undisputed lack of official accountability, operating within the narrative of the war against organized crime. This drug war, which has claimed so many lives, and continues to take place, reshaping the cartel demographics of the nation on a regular basis, is one that positions the image of the victim as central praxis within the process of comprehending the outcomes of violent conflict. Such a problematic renders the Mexican social context as necropolitical in nature, to borrow from Achille Mbembe's insights, and constitutes one that, working within the discourses of a post-Salinas neoliberalist framework, shows signs of a state

of emergency. In dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's ideas on the condition of states of exception, where the power structures become aligned with notions of the sovereign, in addition to engaging with the Foucauldian idea on the implementations and limitations of biopower, Mbembe questions whether "to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2003, 12). Mbembe's assertions here must be understood in the context of a maintained governmental or institutional biopolitical stance, and the author queries this position in relation to a global context of conflict and death:

Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political under the guise of war, or resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? (Mbembe 2003, 12)

Within his analysis, Mbembe relies on Foucault's concept of biopower, as a means through which to explore how the idea of death, in necropolitical terms, much in the same way as life in biopolitics, "emerges through interpretations of embodiment—of corpses, of who kills and of who is targeted for death. Biopolitics is intimately wound into necropolitics since governments protect the lives of some by justifying the deaths of others" (Wright 2011, 709). This idea of maximum state intervention, and indeed sovereignty over life itself, reflects Slavoj Žižek's discussions on the power dynamics in existence between the state and social violence, where he suggests that one "cannot separate violence from the very existence of the state (as the apparatus of class domination): from the standpoint of the subordinated and oppressed, the very existence of a state is a fact of violence" (2012, xxi). Žižek's observations here recall my earlier discussions in Chap. 4, in relation to the role that the Calderón administration played in shaping the current-day conflict, and its contradictory and often paradoxical position in terms of the drug war (Wahnich 2012). With reference to the perceived necropolitical stratagems of power operating in Mexico, Sayak Valencia Triana (2012) comments that in order for us to speak of "necropolítica y biopolítica en el contexto mexicano partiremos del hecho de que en México no existe un único estado" (necropolitics and biopolitics in the

Mexican context we must begin with the understanding that in Mexico there exists no single state) and, instead, she argues, there are two states “el de la insurgencia y el legal” (that of insurgency and the legal state) and both of these “contienen rasgos, caracteres y lógicas” (contain features, characters and logics) (Valencia Triana 2012, 99). These characteristics follow a process that Valencia Triana outlines thus:

La necropolítica de los sujetos *endriagos* sigue los pasos trazados por la biopolítica y sus deseos de gobernabilidad del territorio, la seguridad y la población haciendo de esta gobernabilidad un monopolio de tres elementos: (1) explotación de los recursos naturales del territorio; (2) venta de seguridad privada para garantizar el bienestar de la población; (3) apropiación de los cuerpos de la población civil como mercancías de intercambio o como cuerpos consumidores de estas mercancías ofrecidas por el necromercado. (99)

(The necropolitics of the *endriago* subjects follows the path outlined by biopolitics and its desire of governability of territory, security and the population, making of this sovereignty a monopoly of three elements: (1) The exploitation of natural resources. (2) The selling of private security so as to guarantee the wellbeing of the population. (3) The appropriation of bodies from civil society as exchange merchandise on offer in the form of consumer bodies sold as merchandise by the necromarket).

Therefore, the struggle for supremacy, for territorial control, for sovereign rights to establish autonomy within the Mexican drug war, must be understood as pertaining to Mbembe’s ideas on the necropolitical nature of autocracies working within a postcolonial framework. Furthermore, to problematize the issue, the drug crisis in Mexico is one that is multilayered, fragmented and ever-evolving. In this context, there are no determined enemies, but a collective of possibilities. There are no absolutes, and no defined ethical boundaries. Instead what we have is a flawed political rhetoric that lacks meaning within the violent discourse encountered on the streets of Mexico, where the questionable doctrine of governmental officials merge with the far-reaching tentacles of power controlled by the many factions of organized crime. Moreover, what we see in Escalante’s vision of the conflict is the blurring of culpability and the instigation of a new type of regime, a “narco-democracy” to borrow from Eduardo Valle’s observations made in relation to the Salinas government, but applicable here to a reading of more recent *sexenios*. These governing bodies, having lacked the ability to evolve with transparency, fall prey to criticisms of

corruption that include the alliance with organized crime which serves a global black market economy. As Lucero Solorzano questions, in her review of *Heli* for the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* “¿es bueno para México que autoridades corruptas y grupos de delincuencia organizada promuevan esos niveles de violencia e inseguridad en el territorio nacional?” (is it good for Mexico that corrupt authorities and organized criminal groups provoke these levels of violence and insecurity on national terrain?) (2013, 13), whereas Luis Tovar goes further in his accusations, condemning what he sees as “la institución gubernamental encargada de combatir el *narco* es primerísima colaboradora de este y, por lo que resulta fácil deducir, puede que hasta su líder” (the government institution responsible for battling the *narco* is its foremost collaborator and, as a result it is easy to fathom, perhaps even its leader) (2013, 15). Valencia Triana suggests, however, that the ways in which the neoliberalist currency underpins the conflict in Mexico must be viewed as a form of “capitalismo gore” or “slash capitalism.” In relation to the socioeconomic context of the drug conflict, Valencia Triana defines gore capitalism as referring to the

derramamiento de sangre explícito e injustificado, al altísimo porcentaje de vísceras y desmembramientos, frecuentemente mezclados con la precarización económica, el crimen organizado, la construcción binaria del género y los usos predatorios de los cuerpos, todo esto por medio de la violencia más explícita como herramienta de ‘necroempoderamiento.’ (2012, 84)

(explicit and unjustified spilling of blood, [and] the disproportionate levels of dismemberments and guts, frequently intermixed with an economic precariousness, organized crime, the construction of a gender binary and the predatory use of bodies, all conducted via the medium of an explicit form of violence [that is] used as a tool for necroempowerment).

What is more, the ongoing violent conflict, which witnesses the disruption of political hegemonies and the ceaseless nature of brutal acts carried out on Mexican streets, is one that has shocked the nation into a perpetual state of grief and loss. The general public, at first terrorized into immobility, and then unified in defiance, has borne the brunt of this war that has committed their existence to a collective state of exception (Agamben 2005, 40). Slow to react as a united protest movement against the violence being carried out in their public spaces, the Mexican populace in the affected areas has been misinterpreted as responding subserviently to

circumstance. However, Estelle Tarica (2015) argues that over the years, the inert, or, indeed, seemingly impassive, response to the onslaught of narco violence in Mexico stems not from a position of indifference, but from one of trauma. Borrowing from Adriana Cavarero's insights, Tarica reads the current Mexican condition as one that is framed within a sense of "horrorism." Examining the journalistic work of Marcela Turati and the nonfiction piece *Dolerse: Textos desde un país herido* (*To Hurt: Texts from a wounded country*) by novelist Cristina Rivera Garza, Tarica states, "the sheer overwhelming repetition of violent acts, compounded by a media overexposure, has a numbing effect on the public [...] the Mexican public has been horrified into silence, shocked into stone, resulting in the general loss of empathy" (Tarica 2015). Recalling Cavarero's use of the mythical figure of Medusa, as both a monstrous female and as instigator of the experience of horror through vision, Tarica observes that Medusa's gaze is the medium via which the gorgon is able to petrify her victims, turning them into stone. Tarica explains that "horror is that experience of petrification, which locks us into a mute, traumatized subjectivity," a condition applicable to the victims of narco violence in Mexico. Echoing Susan Sontag's assertions on the need to read the photographic image of suffering within the confines of affective meaning, Tarica asks: "How to break free of the stone and become again a speaking person? How to re-sensitize the Mexican public and 'de-banalize' the suffering of others?" The answer perhaps lies in what the author suggests is the process of rehumanization of the victim. Or, in other words, what Tarica calls the position of "counter-victimization," where the faceless, nameless casualties of this narco war are given an identity, meaning, a voice and a sense of memory. Tarica defines counter-victimization as "an alternative form of victimization, one that constitutes a critique of the Mexican state," and in this context forms a "process whereby the victims of the war on drugs come to be invested with dignity and agency." She is keen to stress that counter-victimization "is not *anti*-victimization," and adds that counter-victimization

addresses the experience of both the direct and indirect victims. It counters the prevailing tendency to criminalize or otherwise tar the reputation of those who have been killed or disappeared, which has the effect of holding them and their families responsible for the violence they have suffered while absolving the state of its responsibility for the violence. (Tarica 2015)

We see this process take place quite clearly in *Heli*, when the protagonist attempts to find justice for the crimes committed against his family. Heli's

endeavor, moreover, is met with cynicism and suspicion, and on several occasions he is asked to sign an official document that confirms an unsubstantiated theory of his father's involvement with the cartels, concluding that this is what ultimately led to his murder. Heli consistently refuses to sign the confession, and is exasperated with the slow pace of the police investigation into the crimes committed against his family, taking it upon himself to embark on a search for his missing sister. In this sense the character of Heli represents both the direct and the indirect victim of this crime, to borrow from Tarica's insights into the condition of the affected individuals in Mexico's drug crisis.

In the broader context of the Mexican drug war, the restoration of the victim's sense of visibility and political audibility is carried out by the family members of the deceased, which forms a collective alliance of shared experiences of loss, which in turn strengthens the counter-discourse to the climate of violence affecting the nation. Evidence of this is seen in the poet Javier Sicilia's led activism, *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), founded after the torture and death of his son at the hands of local cartel members. Or the ongoing presence of the organization *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (May our Daughters Return Home), a mothers' group based in Ciudad Juárez, and cofounded by Norma Andrade and Marisela Ortiz Rivera following the murder of the former's daughter, Lilia Andrade. With her disappearance and death, Lilia became one of the many unaccounted-for victims of gender-related violence occurring in, but not limited to, the predominantly northern areas of the country. And more recently, the armed civilian faction, *Los autodefensas* (self-defenders), who were initially based in Michoacán, and who, in the absence of governmental progress in the restoration of peace to the region, set about ridding their local communities of cartel presence and arresting its members individually, falling into the category of civic resistance to the ongoing violence.⁴ In response to these movements, Tarica (2015) acknowledges that the "discursive shift toward the figure of the victim has gathered intellectual weight thanks in part to the work of journalists, writers, scholars and other commentators, who have amplified the message of activists in books, newspapers, magazines and websites." Furthermore, such intellectual weight has translated into political clout, and in March 2013 the Mexican congress passed and signed the *Ley General de Víctimas* (General Victims' Law). At the time of its inauguration, this legislation marked the first significant step toward officially recognizing the condition and rights of the victim, and began the process of reversing the damage of years of bureaucratic indifference.

VIOLENCE IN *HELI*

Perhaps an important way in which the film *Heli* should be read is via its focus on the role of violence in society, and, specifically, the effects of the drug war's brutality on the individual victim. In this case, Heli and his family constitute direct and indirect victims of this war, of state impunity and of bureaucratic cynicism. By honing in on the effects of systemic violence on the individual, Escalante provides a voice for the countless victims of the conflict in Mexico. And it is through his representation of violence during the torture scene, and his exploration of the traumatic experience through the characters of Heli and Estela, that Escalante is able to rehumanize the voiceless, faceless victims of the narco war's legacy. As I mentioned earlier in my discussions, the lack of hyperbolic scenes of violence in *Heli* makes the film stand apart from other works belonging to the same narco genre. However, although in the past Escalante has shocked audiences for his almost incongruous scenes of extreme violence, *Heli* contains explicit, yet almost stifled, hyperreal sights of torture, to borrow from Jean Baudrillard's (1970) observations, where the fictional virtual violence projected onto the screens from the console gladiators game is visually framed as backdrop to the violence being inflicted onto Beto's body within the fictional setting of the *sicarios'* front room (Fig. 5.4).



Fig. 5.4 Beto (Juan Eduardo Palacios) being tortured in a scene from the film. Still from *Heli*

What we witness in this scene is a simulacrum of violence that extends beyond the framed television screen and spills onto the film's scenario of torture which is shot primarily from the point of view of the character of Heli, who in turn constitutes the next potential victim. Furthermore, it is precisely because Escalante moves away from the glamorized filmic portrayal of torture and violence that paradoxically his approximation to representing reality is that much closer. To achieve this aim, Escalante used a 50 mm lens, and in some cases a 40 mm, so as to heighten the sense of the camera's proximity to its subject, and in the process attempts to replicate the human viewpoint (Escalante 2013, 9). The resulting effect is a claustrophobic sense of space within the frame, where the camera, positioned at a low angle during most of the torture sequences, mimics Heli's viewpoint and, as a consequence, controls the spectator's gaze. The camera angles also engage with the children's viewpoint and their lower physical position in relation to the older *sicarios* standing over them, and who are also carrying out the violence onto Beto's body. The predominance for medium shots in this scene emphasizes the oppressive tone of the narrative, alongside securing a prime position within the frame for the tortured body. This composition recalls Cavarero's observations that the "center of the [torture] scene is occupied by a suffering body, a body reduced to a totally available object, or rather a thing objectified by the reality of pain" (2011, 31). This lack of agency and confrontation with vulnerability and impending death through pain is one that commonly frames the scene of torture, as Cavarero notes, and is applicable to our reading of the trauma inflicted on Beto and Heli, respectively.

In *Heli*, the physical space where the torture takes place is a family's front living room. We see the children playing on the console just before Beto and Heli are dragged into the room, and in the process are paraded past the house's occupants. This spectacle stops the children in their tracks and as a consequence interrupts their violently orientated game of gladiators. Drilled into the ceiling at the center of the living room is a hook, from where the victim is hung and then tortured, in full view of the children, and the other participants. The setting is distinctly unglamorous, a working family home with bare furniture and minimal luxuries. The construction of this scene, therefore, deliberately demystifies the hyper-stylized interpretations of the cartel world and its main players, away from the bling and the power that often characterizes their representation, seen for example in recent Hollywood depictions of the narcotics world, such as in Denis Villeneuve's feature *Sicario* (2015). Although the characters in

the torture scene in *Heli* are *sicarios*, instructed by the local Feds to torture and “dispose” of dissidents and rival gang members, little glamor is attributed to them or their tasks. Present also in the background is an older woman, wearing an apron while working in the kitchen adjacent to the living room/torture chamber. Here the mothering figure of Mexican cinema has deviated significantly from her saintly days of *Cuando los hijos se van* (*When the Children Depart*) (dir. Bustillo Oro 1941) played by Sara García, and instead is replaced in *Heli* by a curious but quiet woman, unperturbed by the violence taking place in her front living room (Fig. 5.5).

The mothering figure steps forward to observe the commotion when the *sicarios* bring the victims in and then steps back again to tend to her chores in the kitchen. The domestic realm in this film becomes host to a contradictory juxtaposition of signifieds, where cartel members openly torture their victims, disfiguring and permanently marking their bodies, offering a necropolitical display of sovereignty, while supper is being made in the background and children contemplate impassively the spectacle of violence being enacted before them. As I observed before, in this context

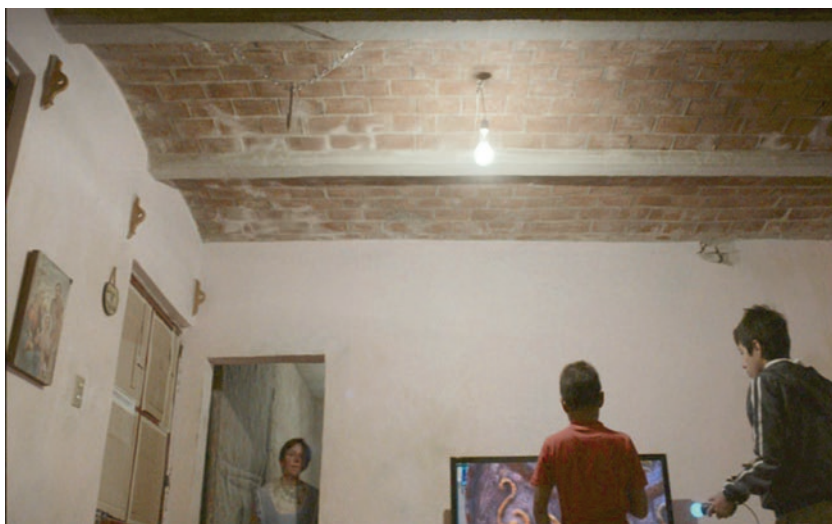


Fig. 5.5 The mothering figure standing in the doorway of a living room that will soon become a torture chamber. Still from *Heli*

the cartels are instructed to torture and “dispose” of bodies, making human life here a commodity that lacks agency and currency within the dominating structures of the Mexican necropolitical social order. The ease with which bodies are dismembered, disposed of and displayed for the purposes of public viewing, is significant, but perhaps indicative of a wider problematic in relation to images of violence in modern-day society. In their work entitled *Disposable Futures: the Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* (2015), Brad Evans and Henry Giroux examine the social impact of violence stemming from over a century of massacres, murders and genocide. Building on Guy Debord’s pioneering work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Evans and Giroux explore the consequences of violence in society and the effects that such visualities have upon the spectator. Echoing Tarica’s observations made above in relation to the Mexican public’s relationship with visualized horror, Evans and Giroux argue that “[s]pectacles of violence are powerful modes of public pedagogy that function, in part, to fragment and alienate an active and engaged citizenry, transforming it into a passive audience” (Evans and Giroux 2015, 33), and thus ensuring control and sovereignty over the vulnerable. The authors expand on this idea exploring the economic imperatives at the heart of social violence, and conclude that contemporary “neoliberal societies deal with spectacles of violence in a particularly novel way. Unlike previous totalitarian systems that relied upon the use of terror of secrecy, modern neoliberal societies bring most things into the open” (2015, 33-34), and one of these said “things” is the evidence of harm inflicted onto the body. Such public spectacles of violence are witnessed on a daily basis in narco-torn Mexico, with corpses hanging from public bridges, decapitations encountered in the streets and mutilated body parts disposed of in the middle of busy roads with the aim of causing maximum public unrest and instilling widespread terror. Evans and Giroux’s suggestion above of contemporary neoliberal society’s public displays of violence echoes Valencia Triana’s readings of the current narco crisis where

the complexity of criminal networks in the Mexican context, as well as its connections with exacerbated neo-liberalism, globalization, the binary construct of gender as political performance and the creation of capitalistic subjectivities [...] are re-colonized by the economy and represented by Mexican criminals and drug traffickers, who within the taxonomy of *gore capitalism* are called *endriago subjects*. (Valencia Triana 2012, 83)

These *endriago* subjects turn to violence as a means of territorial domination and as a way of instilling a sense of terror into the population in order to confirm their own position of sovereignty. Increasingly so, the reliance on technology and mobile devices as a means of recording the violent subjugation of rival gang members and cartel enemies and placing these online is a phenomenon that aligns itself with a similar use of cyberspace and the visual, which is currently manipulated by modern-day terrorist organizations. Evans and Giroux (2015) and Cavarero (2009), in turn have individually focused their research on the image of the terrorist in modern-day society, and the role that the visual medium plays in maintaining a sense of fear in the spectator. In Evans and Giroux's analysis, their case study focuses on the terror group Islamic State, while for Cavarero the self-destructive tendencies of the suicide bomber beckon her investigative attention. These digitalized images of torture, suffering and executions are framed within the discourses of fundamentalist theocratic ideologies, and are assisted in their distribution and consumption thanks to the globalized network provided by the information superhighway. In *Disposable Futures*, Evans and Giroux examine the sense of performativity inherent in the Islamic State videos, which are uploaded onto the online channel YouTube. During these scenes, the role of reversed mimesis (due to the colors of the Islamic State prisoners' jumpsuits, which recall the inmates of the Guantanamo Bay detention units) takes center stage. These recordings serve to focus on the vulnerability of the kneeled victim and the sovereign position of the Islamic State executioner standing over them, who in turn embodies the rhetoric of violence pertaining to the movement itself. Framed within notions of theatricality, these spectacles of violence constitute the ultimate instigators of terror, as they force the spectator to contemplate the horror of a death via decapitation. Arousing the Freudian dread of castration and forcing the spectator to observe the destruction of what Cavarero notes is the most singular part of the human body, the act of decapitation constitutes one of the most visually terrorizing forms of execution. Furthermore, borrowing from Cavarero's own ideas on the subject, Evans and Giroux note that in relation to the Islamic State recordings "what is particularly disturbing about this performative enactment is the manner in which the severed head creates an interchange of gazes, where the lines between victim and spectator enter a more complex relationship" (2015, 233). What this exchange of gazes involves, in addition to the initial reactions of repulsion and shock, is the process of identification with the victim, conducted through the channel of vision,

constituting an acknowledgment of human mortality. These extreme scenes of violence, of inflictions of pain on the body, of mass torture and mutilations, call for a new form of thinking in relation to terrorism in the twenty-first century. In this sense, Cavarero identifies the need for a new etymology that encompasses all of the contradictory, multifaceted and complex underpinnings of the spectacles of violence existent in a globalized post-9/11 context. Her term “horrorism” aims to describe the experience as defined by the presence of radicalism, and the sense of terror instilled by organizations and individuals who aim to harm and self-harm, while at the same time acknowledging the sense of sheer horror aroused by the sight. In relation to the spectator’s response to the dismembered body, Cavarero returns to the image of Medusa, discussed earlier in this chapter, and observes:

Medusa is a severed head. The body is revulsed above all by its own dismemberment, the violence that undoes it and disfigures it [...] The human being, as an incarnated being, is here offended in the ontological dignity of its being as body, more precisely, in its being as singular body. (2009, 8)

The dismembered corpse as a representation of a body that is no longer singular, whole and, therefore, human is what Cavarero denotes to be the crux of the traumatic experience of looking at the evidence of horror. Building on Cavarero’s insights, Evans and Giroux state that “[b]eheading serves a very specific symbolic function that brings directly to the fore the question of subjectivity” (2015, 232-3). And this is because the “uniqueness of human forms is concentrated in its facial expressiveness, what is being destroyed with the act of beheading is precisely the ‘singularity of each person’” (2015, 233). In addition, what Cavarero describes as the viewer’s responsive inclination toward aversion in relation to this act of violation of the body occurs because

the severed head is the symbol of that which extreme violence has chosen for its object. The (specifically) human being is filled with repugnance for this violence, which aims primarily not to kill it but to destroy its humanity, to inflict wounds on it that will undo and dismember it. Nor is this a repugnance that grips the victim of dehumanization alone, the specific wounded body lying at the scene of horror. As singular bodies, the repugnance extends to all of us. Whoever shares in the human condition also shares in disgust for an ontological crime that aims to strike it in order to dehumanize it. (Cavarero 2009, 16)

The disposing of decapitated heads in public spaces as symbols of sovereignty by rivalling cartels constitutes a spectacle of violence that has become commonplace on Mexican streets, and governs the visible nature of the war on drugs. Such displays of violence serve to terrorize the population and act as warning signifiers to enemies of organized crime, and in the process silence spectators in a state of horror. Within these scenes, dismembered body parts, which are disposed of in public streets, act as reminders of the process of dehumanization at the heart of the criminal activity in the quest for supremacy and territorial control. Like their terrorist counterparts, members of organized crime, such as the Zetas and the now the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG), regularly turn to the internet and, more specifically, to online channels such as YouTube and designated cartel websites. On these sites, postings of cartel victims are placed in subordinated positions, and/or scenes of torture take center stage, within the performativity of these spectacles of violence. And so, although not driven by theocratic ideologies, the Mexican cartels and their public performances of torture and dismemberment, which are demarcated onto the bodies of their victims, must be read within the same theoretical framework as those provided by Evans and Giroux in relation to Islamic State's reign of terror and visual exposures of violence. Like Islamic State, the Mexican cartels use the internet to extend their performances of terror and project visions of torture, dismemberment and execution as visual signifiers of domination. Like Islamic State, the Mexican *sicarios* perform for the camera, engaging in a dialogue with the subjugated victim, who is kneeling, tied up, dehumanized and often monosyllabic, uttering sufficient words to confirm their identity and affiliation. And just like their counterparts in the Islamic State videos, the Mexican cartel victims maintain the dignified stare, resolute in the approximation of imminent death. I propose therefore that the cartel violence operating at the core of the drug war in Mexico must be read within the same theoretical framework as those applied to the conceptualization of terrorist organizations within post-9/11 global radicalized initiatives. Assisted by the internet, the violent discourse of the criminal narco world, like those of the terrorist group Islamic State, is far reaching, and globally affecting.

In *Heli*, Escalante acknowledges the presence of cartel violence on cyberspace, and during the torture scene one of the children begins to record the images of violence on his mobile phone, with the aim of uploading it onto YouTube. After filming this scene, Escalante came across a

video on YouTube, not that dissimilar to his fictional creation, whereby children are filmed torturing a man's body that is hung in the middle of a room. Commentating on the once underground activity of torture, which in the digital era has become common visual currency, Evans and Giroux note that "[t]orture, in this case, materially perpetrated on bodies but no longer concealed, indeed acted out for a worldwide audience that the Internet guarantees, becomes spectacle" (2015, 230). The desire to share, and in the process reduce the dehumanizing process of torture to a mere spectacle is one that has become problematized due to the increasing accessibility of the visual via social media platforms. In this sense, the democratization of the internet has consequently led to the unveiling of the once historically secretive act of torture, turning the event into a visualized display of sovereignty and necropolitical abuses of power.

Furthermore, the violence contained in the torture scene in *Heli* has caused controversy among critics due to its explicit nature, but more so because of the presence of children within the scene. Niamh Thornton (2014), for example, in her online review of the film observes that "the inclusion of the children and their involvement in the torture as a banal moment in their lives, completes the sense of disgust at what is taking place" (Thornton 2014), whereas *the Guardian* film critic Mark Kermode comments that the torture scene in *Heli* depicts a "greater horror of a world in which childhood itself appears to have been incinerated" (Kermode 2014). The children in this torture scene are not only spectators of the spectacle of violence, but are active participants, filming the event for the online channel YouTube, engaging in the infliction of pain and acting as commentators to the senselessness of the whole affair. At one point, one of the children named Morocho asks what crime Beto is supposed to have committed to merit this torture. The other child, Guayo, shrugs his shoulders; it seems that proven culpability is not important when it comes to carrying out corporeal punishment. Guayo in turn responds to the challenge, and stands up to take the baton himself and embarks on beating Beto's exposed back. The positioning of Beto's body at the center of the room, alongside the undivided attention of his audience, point toward the element of performance that is inherent within the enactment of torture, and outlines the dynamics of power at play. In relation to these interplays of power at the scene of torture, Elaine Scarry (1985) observes:

Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body. It then goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power. (27)

While Beto is time and again rendered unconscious through the excruciating pain endured, the torturers engage in physical and verbal violence, taunting his vulnerability and ultimately destroying his sense of masculinity. The prolonged agonizing state of the torture scene is mirrored in Escalante's camera work, where the unrelenting focus favors the static position, an aesthetic style often attributed to the work of his colleague and mentor, Carlos Reygadas. At first it seems as though death is imminent for the torture victims in *Heli*, and as we observe both Beto and Heli as helpless objects at the hands of their captors, we recall Cavarero's insights into the condition of the vulnerable:

Death may come at the end, but it is not the end in view. The dead body, no matter how mutilated, is only a residue of the scene of torture. The special form of horrorism of which the torturer is the featured protagonist actually prefers to consummate itself on the living body, to prolong the suffering inscribed in the *vulnus*, bringing the vulnerable one to the limit of bearability of pain and offense. (2011, 31)

It is significant therefore that Beto is not killed as a consequence of his torture, but is murdered in a very public manner, carried out in a public place and in the most humiliating way. As we observe in the circular structured narrative, where the opening scene outlines the closeup shot of Beto's bloodied face, set against a twitching foot, we later learn, when we return to this episode after the torture scene, that the other body part within the frame belongs to Beto. And it seems that Beto, despite all of the violence endured, is semiconscious, his body physically manifesting the effects of the trauma. Beto meets his death by being hung from a bridge, with his trousers around his ankles, conducted as the ultimate grievance

against his humanity and sense of masculinity. Within this vision Beto's physical wounds on the body now act as inscriptions of a recent trauma, and what later becomes his corpse will embody the residue of torture of which Cavarero speaks. Beto's body remains hanging on the bridge, as a warning sight and as a symbol of the cartel's control and supremacy. A visual relic of a violent act, the horrorism contained in these unclaimed bodies that hang from Mexico's overpasses and pedestrian bridges is iconic of the war on drugs, a war that operates outside of the normal parameters of warfare and engages in battle with an ever-changing and at times invisible enemy. Beto's tortured body, moreover, must be read as a symbol of the violent discourse dominating the narco conflict. Within this context Beto's body becomes emblematic of a traumatized nation, a wound culture that manifests itself through the stillness of inexpressible pain, inflicted onto the social fabric and experienced through the physicality of corporeal grievance.

NOTES

1. See for example Natalia Almada's *El velador* (2011), Bernardo Ruiz's *Reportero* (2012), Matthew Heineman's *Cartel Land* (2015) and Tatian Huezo's *Tempestad* (2016), among others.
2. "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together" (Arendt 1964, 276).
3. Arendt attributed Eichmann's lack of ability to rationalize and therefore philosophically reflect on the consequences of his actions as an indictment of the banality of evil, wherein moral and philosophical responsibility lies in one's capacity to reflect. This is key to an understanding of Arendt's notion of a banality of evil and its discourse in relation to Eichmann's trial in Israel.
4. At the time of writing large sections of the autodefensas have been absorbed into a faction of the Mexican army known as SEDENA, and have registered their weapons. Others, who refused to join due to a mistrust of the government, are persecuted by the authorities for failing to register their armaments, with the former founder of the group, Dr. José Manuel Mireles Valverde, serving time in prison and currently being held without charge.

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Spectral Visions: Mexican Directors in Europe (Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón)

In the last 25 years I've been living in a country all of our own. Part of it is here, part of it in Europe, part of it everywhere [...] Because I think that the greatest thing that our art does and our industry does is to erase the lines in the sand, we should continue doing that when the world tells us to make them deeper. (Graham 2018)

Guillermo del Toro

I joke that, 60 years ago, Buñuel went to Mexico to shoot *Los Olvidados* and, 60 years later, this is my version, shot in Barcelona [...] I wanted to shoot in my own language. It's the first film I did in Europe. I observed an urgent phenomenon no one wants to talk about: immigration. (Fine 2011)

Alejandro González Iñárritu

If *Children of Men* can be said to have a message [...] What's really relevant now is to stop being complacent. (Riesman 2017)

Alfonso Cuarón

Until now we have observed in previous chapters how Mexican cinema's depiction of main political events and crises reflects the nation's growing concern with social instability and violent conflict. What we have failed to explore until now, however, is the impact that Mexican directors have had on the global film industry. Although varying in their thematic approach and focus, the films analyzed in this chapter will demonstrate a preoccupation with an unstable social context, which in narrative terms has been translated to differing geographical locations and historical time frames.

For several decades now, Mexican directors, cinematographers, scriptwriters and designers have been working in the US film industry with immensely successful results. These success stories have seen the rise of what have now become household names within the film industry, seen for example in the multi-premiered Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón, also referred to as the “three amigos” (Shaw 2013, Sánchez Prado 2014), alongside the award-winning camerawork of Emmanuel Lubezki. These three directors have become the most well-known filmmakers working outside of Mexico, and epitomize the remarkable achievements of their generation.

In the early 1990s, Alfonso Cuarón (followed a few years later by Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro González Iñárritu) took on board Hollywood pitches and turned these into international blockbusters, delivering products infused with the directors’ own choice of narrative style and filming techniques. For example, in *A Little Princess* (1995) Cuarón’s first US production, the element of fantasy is imbued with his visual aesthetic and framed by the camera’s fascination with spiral forms and circular movements, which he borrows from his first feature film, *Sólo con tu pareja* (*Love in the Time of Hysteria*) (1991). *A Little Princess* (1995) preceded the release of Cuarón’s adaptation of Charles Dickens’ classic novel *Great Expectations* (1861), in 1998, starring Ethan Hawke, Gwyneth Paltrow and Robert De Niro. In his version of the popular Dickensian tale, Cuarón relocates Pip’s original adventures in Victorian England to a 1990s New York setting. Cuarón continued to achieve unprecedented international success and accolades with the release of his *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother Too*) (2001), which was followed by his interpretation of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), contributing toward the popular franchise. His next film, the critically acclaimed *Children of Men* (2006) demonstrated his visionary skills and versatility as a director and signaled a move toward the genre of science fiction drama. *Children of Men* was subsequently followed by his global box office success *Gravity* (2012), a science fiction thriller starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney, which went on to win Cuarón his first Oscar for Best Director at the Eighty-Sixth Academy Awards.¹ Cuarón’s third Spanish-speaking film, *Roma* (2018), was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won three of these in the categories of Best Director, Best Cinematography and Best Foreign Language Film.²

Shortly after the unprecedented success of *Amores perros* (*Love’s a Bitch*) (2000), Iñárritu’s second feature, entitled *21 grams* (2003), showcased

some of Hollywood's best acting talents seen in the figures of Sean Penn, Benicio del Toro and Naomi Watts. As with Cuarón's first Hollywood production, Iñárritu borrows aesthetic stylistics present in *Amores perros* and incorporates these into *21 grams*, a film that takes the reflection on man's mortality as central thematic praxis. The narrative structure, developed in his previous two films, and which has since been identified as pertaining to the concept of "hyperlink cinema" (Arona Krems and Dunbar 2013), provides a framework for the exploration of a globalized context where narratives intertwine across continents through the presence of a shared object, moment, or experience (Quart 2005). This methodology is used once more in Iñárritu's third film *Babel* (2006), starring Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt. In this film, the protagonists find themselves in the midst of an international rescue mission after Cate's character Susan is accidentally shot by a shepherd boy while on a tour bus in rural Morocco. This incident forms the catalyst for a series of events that link the main characters in the United States, Japan, Mexico and Morocco. In his fourth film, *Biutiful* (2010), Iñárritu returns to a Spanish-language setting, and breaks away from the network filmic structure of his previous films to experiment with linear narrative forms (Silvey 2013). In *Biutiful*, a film which will be examined in this chapter, Iñárritu focuses on the micro-effects of economic globalization, alongside his recurring speculations on human mortality explored in earlier work, such as *21 Grams* and *Babel*. In 2015, Iñárritu won his first Academy Award for Best Director, for his dark comedy, *Birdman* (2014), starring Michael Keaton as a fading actor struggling to put on a Broadway show. *Birdman* also won Best Original Screenplay and Best Picture at the Academy Awards that same year, and granted Emmanuel Lubezki his second Academy Award for Best Cinematography.³ Two years later, Iñárritu went on to win his second Oscar for Best Director with his film *The Revenant* (2015), starring Leonardo DiCaprio at the Eighty-Eighth Academy Awards in February 2016, where DiCaprio won his first Oscar for Best Actor with his performance in *The Revenant*.

Following the success of his opera prima, *Cronos* (1993), a film that reinterpreted the staple vampire genre and placed it in a contemporary Mexican context, Guillermo del Toro also ventured north to Hollywood to continue his career. In Hollywood, del Toro impressed audiences with his science fiction horror films, *Mimic* (1997), *Blade 2* (2002) and *Pacific Rim* (2014), and secured cult status with his *Hellboy* series—*Hellboy* (2002) and *Hellboy: the Golden Army* (2008)—alongside his more recent

return to the Gothic world in *Crimson Peak* (2015). Del Toro's Spanish-speaking films, moreover, place the child at the core of their plot development, initially employed in *Cronos*, his first film. The condition of childhood as a narrative vehicle for exploring a violent world would be one that is prioritized in del Toro's subsequent Spanish films. In this context, the narratives are situated in war-torn Spain, explored in his *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*) (2001) and in *El laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*) (2006). Following his Spanish Civil War films, del Toro continued working in Hollywood, directing *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *Crimson Peak* (2015), respectively. At the Ninetieth Academy Awards, del Toro won his first Oscar for Best Director for his fantasy thriller *The Shape of Water* (2017), a love story set during the Cold War era and which tells the tale of the romance between a domestic worker and an amphibian water creature.⁴

THE EUROPEAN CONNECTION

Aside from the significant contribution to Hollywood projects that all three aforementioned directors have made, and the subsequent accolades granted, my interest in this chapter is drawn to the interpretations of European society—past, present and future—that del Toro, Iñárritu and Cuarón, respectively, provide within their films. What perhaps is significant to note is how all three directors contribute toward a visualization of key moments in European history, seen for example in the Spanish Civil War, and explored locally in del Toro's *El espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno*. Or the interpretation of a hybrid European spatial hub, seen in the contemporary city of Barcelona experiencing the depths of an economic crisis, as examined in *Biutiful*. In Iñárritu's film, the city is emblematic of a sense of European contemporaneity expressed in multiple ways, which has been shaped by financial structures that economically unify regions, and in turn expose capitalist discourses that exist to the detriment of the illegal migrant workforce in place. The migrants in question, originating from non-EU nations, commence their journeys to Europe propelled by the desire to find employment, and/or are seeking asylum from economic and political hardships and war. Often these same migrants, as the film *Biutiful* attempts to explore, remain vulnerable to exploitation and remain "invisible" within the power structures of neoliberal enterprise. The resulting effect from this officially unrecognized labor market, comprised in *Biutiful* of non-European descendants, helps structure a

two-tier economic system operating on the streets of Barcelona (and other European capitals) and highlights a problematic social condition that lies at the heart of European immigration policy. This same notion of a “fortress” Europe is expanded upon in Cuarón’s filmic United Kingdom in *Children of Men*, where the director provides a vision of a dangerous and segregated island nation set in the year 2027. In Cuarón’s futuristic world, UK domestic political rhetoric is shaped by xenophobia and fear, causing society to digress into an anarchistic state, driven by desperation and a lack of hope for the future.

Thus, this chapter will take as its investigative premise the role all three Mexican directors have maintained in providing a visual re-creation of European history and contemporary society and the interpretation of a future apocalyptic world. Remaining highly influential, the work of these filmmakers provides narratives that are in dialogue with the transnational tendencies of contemporary filmmaking. The investigations of this chapter, therefore, will observe the so-called “three amigos of cinema” and their involvement in and the production of thematically European focused films. Incidentally, as observed above, all three directors offer a view of an imagined European country from the past, the present and the future. Each filmic text portrays bleak yet paradoxically uplifting visualizations of a European society that is governed by corruption, social decay, despair and violence, and yet at times is hopeful of an improved condition for future generations.

The child protagonist, a favorite in del Toro’s Spanish-speaking films, becomes the catalyst for the narrative events that take place in his Iberian films; their insights are the reflection through which we view the world, and the hope of potential change for a better future. In his films, children form the link between fantasy and reality, bridging the two in a narrative framework that borrows from the fairytale, Celtic myth, the historical record and the Gothic and horror genres. Thus, examining the past, in order to reflect on the present, is the starting point for this chapter, through my analysis of Guillermo del Toro’s interpretation of Spain in the context of the Civil War—a moment that was critical to modern European history, and shaped twenty-first-century Spain’s identity through the nation’s processing of the cultural traumas stemming from the conflict. Following my analysis of the past, the present condition of Spain, seen through the eyes of a dying man, will be explored in Iñárritu’s portrayal of modern-day Barcelona in his film *Biutiful*. The film’s scrutiny is focused on the cosmopolitan Catalan city, a hybrid space that plays host to a

multiplicity of ethnic groups and articulates the social anxieties provoked by the economic crises of a collective monetary system on the brink of collapse during the global financial crisis of 2008. Finally, the vision of a future United Kingdom, and the transient notion of a European Union construct, which becomes a fortress reality (Geddes 2000), is explored in Cuarón's representation of a national (and subsequently global) dystopia, succumbed to the environmental and social disasters now both threatening the human race and questioning its status as a civilization.

THE HAUNTOLOGIES OF THE PAST: SPECTRAL HORRORS IN GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S SPAIN

Much of the current scholarly work conducted on Guillermo del Toro's Spanish-language films (*Cronos*, *El espinazo del diablo*, and *El laberinto del fauno*) has, among other things, observed the cultural and economic context for their production (Shaw 2013; Wright 2013; Sánchez Prado 2014), the element of the reappropriation of history within the narratives (Hardcastle 2005), and the filmic texts' engagement with national discourse prevalent at the time of making (Labanyi 2007). These concerns are manifested in the forms of a rapidly changing society brought about through entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (*Cronos*) or the modern hauntings of the nationally repressed historical trauma of the Spanish Civil War (*El espinazo*, *El laberinto*). This first section of the chapter will take as its exploratory premise the examination of *El espinazo*—the first of del Toro's Spanish Civil War films. Taking on board and expanding upon scholarly work conducted in the field, my analysis will observe the significance and role of the specter in *El espinazo*, beyond the symbolic and cognitive meanings attributed to its presence. It will read the framing of the ghostly apparitions in the narrative as examples of del Toro's attempts to redefine the Gothic mode on the screen. What is key to an understanding of this process is the observation of del Toro's use of cinematic language, noting his attempts at reconceptualizing a familiar and influential genre. Furthermore, the analysis will also focus on the important scenes involving Jacinto and his photographic image. The significance of photographs acting as visual traces of a lost past, as metaphors for the specter, and as visual sources of (unseen) history is alluded to throughout the film and will be explored in detail later in this chapter. Underlying the presence of the specter in the film is the notion of

mortality and, crucially, the role the photographic image plays in articulating such a concern. The photograph as emblematic of a past existence will be scrutinized here, and the analysis will focus on the important scenes involving Jacinto and his photographic image.

Despite the apparent differences in narrative focus, del Toro's three Spanish-language films are linked by a common desire to explore issues that are imperative to the director. Del Toro's Hispanic films, moreover, provide the forum for an exploration of a system of beliefs and intellectual questionings that are crucially important for the filmmaker and are framed within the context of the supernatural. For instance, *Cronos*, his opera prima, allowed del Toro to examine the vampire genre set in a modern Mexican context and, in the process, redefined the paradigm in all its contradictions of the sublime and the abject—encapsulated in his creation of the likable yet paradoxically repulsive bloodsucker, Jesús Gris (Federico Luppi). Next, del Toro turned his attention to the image of the ghost in his second Spanish-language film, *El espinazo*, where the specter took both the form of a monstrous vision, alongside its role as representing ethereal vulnerability. In *El espinazo*, the child-ghost is portrayed as both a frightening, grotesque spectacle and as a reminder of a terrible crime committed against an innocent boy. This senseless crime against a child returns as an important event that concludes the narrative of *El laberinto*, a film that uses the magical realm of a child's imaginative universe to explore parallel stories that testify to the infliction of violence, armed conflict and injustice.

There are compelling intellectual reasons for focusing solely on *El espinazo* in this chapter. First, del Toro has labeled this his "first film" despite the fact that he had already completed two other features prior to the making of *El espinazo*. Having access to, and absolute control over, all aspects of preproduction, filmmaking and postproduction for *El espinazo*, combined with adequate funding in the form of cofinancing, contributed toward a smoother running of the project as a whole. With hindsight del Toro reflects that "*Devil's Backbone* saved my creative life; it allowed me to survive the hardships of *Mimic*" a project on which the filmmaker did not have absolute creative control (DVD extras). Second, it is in *El espinazo* where we find evidence of del Toro's personal directorial and aesthetic style, borrowing from and reworking the Gothic mode. Del Toro's observations on generic models and their narrative fluidity, his pursuit of a cohesive aesthetic, alongside his employment of astute camerawork that connects with its subject, all feature prominently in the film to be analyzed. Therefore, *El espinazo* marks a significant point of departure in the

trajectory of del Toro's career and, as such, merits further investigative scrutiny. And third, due to its conception, intertextuality, and financial setup, *El espinazo*, in line with his other two Hispanic films, is a testament to what Deborah Shaw (2013) identifies as being quintessentially transnational in relation to del Toro's work. The term "transnationalism" and its application to a categorization of cinema, and in particular Latin American cinema, is beyond the scope and aim of this chapter. However, I will return to these discussions in Chap. 7, where I will analyze a multi-generic, multi-directed and multinational film seen in *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer, Racine et al. 2002).

CONTEXT

Much has been written on the location and the historical setting for *El espinazo* (Hardcastle 2005; Labanyi 2007; Shaw 2013; Wright 2013). Del Toro himself has stated that initially the film was meant to take place during the Mexican Revolution (Davies 2006). However, this idea changed once del Toro read David Muñoz and Antonio Trashorras' script entitled *La bomba* (*The Bomb*), which then led him into making the decision to merge his Mexican script with that of Muñoz and Trashorras' story in order to create the hybrid piece, renamed *El espinazo del diablo* (DVD extras). In the process del Toro relocated the film's historical setting to the context of the Spanish Civil War. Although the war is an important element in the film and its presence is felt throughout the narrative, both symbolically and systematically through the image of the undetonated bomb, del Toro observes that *El espinazo* should not be read as a film solely about the historical armed conflict (DVD extras). If anything, the narrative and its location, set in an isolated orphanage in the middle of a barren landscape, act as a microcosm of the external conflicts taking place nationally. We are presented with only one scene depicting some of the violence of the war, observed during the execution of Carlos' tutor alongside other members from the International Brigade, which is conducted in the nearby town and is witnessed by Dr. Casares (Federico Luppi). However, apart from this scene, the war is only mentioned in passing conversation, and its potential conclusion (the victory of the Nationalists) is prepared for by the cross and the Nationalist flags that the boys are instructed to place in the building's public spaces. By contrast, symbolic recognitions of the Civil War occur throughout the narrative. Dr. Casares' name evokes that of the Republic's last president, Santiago Casares

Quiroga, who was in office during the military uprising of July 1936, an event that set in motion the subsequent Civil War. The children in the school are orphans of Republican loyalists, and Carmen's husband, we learn, died fighting on the Republican side. Del Toro himself argues that the entire orphanage and its inhabitants symbolize the Civil War and its key players, and the building stands as an emblem of the Spanish nation in 1939 (DVD extras). In this context, Jacinto personifies the Fascists, who, in del Toro's mind, maintained a belief in their own superiority, which in turn fed their narcissism. This view is explored more in depth in the character of Captain Vidal in *El laberinto*. In several scenes where he shaves before a mirror, Vidal externalizes a superficial narcissism through the framing of his reflected image. The old Republic in *El espinazo* is embodied in the character of Dr. Casares and, to a certain extent, in Carmen (Marisa Paredes), the headmistress of the school. The characters of Casares and Carmen, although well meaning, are, in del Toro's view, "ultimately flawed" (Chun 2002, 29). In turn, the children of the orphanage represent the Spanish population in generic terms and are shown to be united in fighting against the brutality of an internal aggressor (seen in the character of Jacinto). In the end they emerge victorious, although battered, bruised and, in some cases, maimed. In the closing scenes of the film, the orphans face an uncertain and undefined future as they venture out onto the deserted plains and into the unknown.

El espinazo begins with two events: the death of a child and the arrival of the mysterious bomb, which remains undetonated in the school's patio. Seen by many as a bad omen, the arrival of the bomb coincides with the disappearance of a child named Santi (Junio Valverde) from the orphanage. We later learn that Santi's sudden demise, at the hands of Jacinto, is the reason for the ghostly figure that now haunts the orphanage at night but also presents itself to Carlos (Fernando Tielve) on the day of his arrival at the school (Fig. 6.1).

This inclusion of a ghostly apparition in broad daylight illustrates del Toro's attempts to redefine the Gothic genre on the screen. Traditionally conceived as a nocturnal being, inhabiting spooky houses, manors and castles (Botting 1996), the specter takes prime position within the confines of the Gothic novel. What is more, ghostly appearances at night work in conjunction with the Gothic architecture to create a suspenseful ambience.

Considerable scholarly work has been conducted on the role and origins of the Gothic, and equally significant attention has been paid to the



Fig. 6.1 Daily ghostly apparitions in a scene from *El espinazo del diablo* (2001)

notion of the specter within a hauntological framework of enquiry (Davis 2007; Hogle 2002; Punter 1996). The links between the hauntologies of the Civil War and their meanings for modern Spain have been observed as forming part of a wider manifestation of national trauma derived from the conflict and its aftermath (Labanyi 2007). In addition, the notion of ghostly hauntings reflecting an unresolved cultural trauma is favored by Anne Hardcastle (2005) in her readings of *El espinazo*. The concept of a haunting is equally relevant to a number of other cinematic productions from Spain (e.g., *El orfanato* (*The Orphanage*) (dir. Juan Antonio Bayona 2007) and *NO-DO* (*The Haunting*) (dir. Elio Quiroga 2009) containing the specter at the heart of their narratives (Wright 2013, 112). Working within the frameworks of psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Enrique Ajuria Ibarra (2012, 56) suggests that the presence of the specter in *El espinazo* is emblematic of a sense of national trauma that remains unresolved within the Spanish psyche. He alludes to the significance of the apparitions as indicators of a process of repetition of the traumatic event, or the resurfacing of the unconscious that is characteristic of the condition: “The ghost as haunting makes the subject relive what has been silenced, allowing this to be intrinsically related with trauma, a psychical action that compulsively repeats events that have marked the subject’s unconscious” (Ajuria Ibarra 2012, 56). In a similar vein, the haunting in

the Gothic narrative acts as a reminder of forgotten and unresolved crimes committed in the past. Furthermore, as Ajuria Ibarra notes, Santi's ghost exists because it connects "the present with an event that has been overlooked and left unfinished," constituting an episode from the past that "continues to float on, unprocessed in the flow of a narrative which the ghost keeps on recalling by its haunting" (2012, 60). This idea is visually encapsulated in one of the final scenes set after Jacinto's death in the pool, where we witness his photographs, traces of a past life, floating on the surface of the amber-colored water. This same image is then followed by the figure of Santi's ghost standing posed as if floating on the surface of the water, defiantly returning the gaze of the spectator. Despite carrying out his revenge on Jacinto, the specter's desires remain incomplete, leading to a continuation of the haunting in the space where he met his end, suggestively and inconclusively reliving the trauma, in a world shared with the living. The film, therefore, plays with perceptions of existential boundaries, between the living and the dead in a universe leveled by the concomitance of the two realms, in what Colin Davis in his analysis of Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001) calls "the unresolved and unresolved coexistence of competing orders" (2010, 69). *El espínazo* shares a similar ending to *The Others* in that the ghosts remain to haunt the building, refusing to depart at the end of the narrative. A notion of unfinished business, akin to a lingering sense of inconclusive resolution, permeates the finale of *El espínazo*, whereby not only do we see Santi's ghost remaining by the pool, but the materialization of a new specter in the shape of Dr. Casares, who, like Grace (Nicole Kidman) in *The Others*, promises never to abandon the building. However, it is not only the ghosts that haunt buildings, as seen in *The Others* and also in *El orfanato*, but the buildings themselves that, through their witnessing of a past trauma or crime, take on a much more fundamental role in the haunting process. One example where this idea is explored further can be found in Nigel Kneale's BBC play, *The Stone Tape* (1972). A generic hybrid that incorporates science fiction and horror, the story of *The Stone Tape* focuses on a team of scientists who move to a new research facility that is located in a renovated Victorian mansion which is reputed to be haunted. After a number of sightings and apparitions, the scientists attempt to establish whether the brickwork of the building has taken on the role of a recording medium for past traumatic events. Guillermo del Toro credits *The Stone Tape* as influential in shaping his own ideas on spatial hauntings in his film (DVD extras). The notion of a recorded imprint left on the materiality of

a building, with the resulting effect of a condemned specter reliving and repeating the trauma of death through the haunting, therefore, is something that fascinated del Toro and helped mold the way he visualized the specter and its space in *El espinazo*. For del Toro, the image of Santi existing at the bottom of the pool epitomizes his own understanding of the quintessential essence of a ghost (DVD extras). These speculations as to what constitutes a haunting and what shapes a ghostly apparition find their way into the narrative of *El espinazo* and are articulated by Dr. Casares' contemplations at the start and at the end of the film.

The film begins with a questioning of what constitutes a ghost, and, as observed above, Dr. Casares' voice-over offers some suggested definitions. Among these, the notion of a blurry photograph, suspended in time, is used as a metaphor for the specter. The same questions are repeated toward the end of the film when Dr. Casares acknowledges his now-ghostly existence. Jacques Derrida, in his analysis of the role of the visual within notions of spectrality, observes the problematic nature of the specter because it "speaks of the spectacle" therefore maintaining a performative quality. Furthermore, Derrida questions the role of the specter within the visual field amid its complex location, and notes that the "specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood" (2013, 38). Santi's ghost, moreover, by the very nature of its appearance embodies Derrida's dichotomy of the specter's presence. He appears to Carlos in ghostly form, while also manifesting corporeal secretions; he has a stream of blood exiting the wound on his head. He is also equipped with a material physicality normally denied to the specter as we see him being able to leave footprints on the floor and touch Carlos on the shoulder.

In addition to the unsettling nature of his appearance, Santi's ghost demonstrates a vulnerability that was important for del Toro's creative purpose. Del Toro has stated that it was his desire to create in *El espinazo* the vision of a ghost never before seen on the screen (DVD extras). In the film the specter's appearance is meant to convey a sense of fragility and the surface of his facial features are supposed to resemble that of a cracked porcelain doll. The ambiguous nature of Santi's ghostly role, however, is played out during the first half of the film after a series of spooky apparitions, coupled with his utterance "Todos vais a morir" (You will all die). This whispering at first is interpreted as a threat, by Carlos, but is later confirmed as a warning of imminent danger at the hands of a deranged Jacinto (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3).



Fig. 6.2 Carlos (Fernando Tielve) in a scene from *El espinazo del diablo*



Fig. 6.3 Santi's ghost (Junio Valverde) appears to Carlos in the kitchen. Still from *El espinazo del diablo*

Carlos returns to the kitchen time and again, driven by both curiosity and a desire to unravel the truth behind the spectral hauntings. He speaks directly to Santi's ghost, who whispers into his ear and reveals what lies at the heart of his unfulfilled desire: avenging his untimely death. Commenting

on Derrida's observation on the need to speak and listen to the specter, Colin Davis suggests that "conversing with specters is not undertaken in the expectation that they will reveal some secret, shameful or otherwise. Rather, it may open us up to the experience of secrecy as such: an essential unknowing, which underlies and may undermine what we think we know" (2005, 377). Our perceptions of Santi's ghost change after this shared moment with Carlos; he is seen less as a monster and more as a victim of a past crime. Traces of a former life now perished, the ghostly apparitions in *El espinazo* articulate a lingering desire for revenge. As Ajuria Ibarra suggests, Santi's ghost "haunts because it also wants to acquire meaning. Santi was thought to have fled the orphanage, and hence he was almost erased from the memory of these people. His ghost brings back the necessity to relive a past, unfinished experience so as to morally amend it: his unjust death must be avenged" (2012, 60).

Ajuria Ibarra's observation above ties in with del Toro's expressed desire to relocate our perception of the monster and the monstrous. Despite the menacing appearance of Santi's ghost, he epitomizes yet another victim of violence. A notion of the monstrous in *El espinazo*, therefore, is transferred from that of the specter to a living character, seen in the image of Jacinto, as Ann Davies points out (2006, 140). Furthermore, as my discussions have noted earlier in this chapter, the conflict taking place outside of the orphanage finds resonance with the internal conflicts and aggression being carried out at the hands of Jacinto. The war raging outside of the school's walls is mimetically performed inside of the building, with innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions of a ruthless and callous (human) monster, personified by Jacinto. Equally, the element of war becomes symbolic of the monstrous as a whole, because war, in del Toro's mind, creates (human and palpable) monsters, as will be observed below.

THE GOTHIC

The presence of the specter, as the articulation of a past wrongdoing and in need of resolution, is an important characteristic of the Gothic tradition and is therefore one that we find at the center of *El espinazo's* narrative. Traditionally, within the Gothic mode, the specter constituted the articulation of social anxieties and unconscious fears. In her work on the Gothic novel, Ann B. Tracy notes:

the world of Gothic fiction is characterized by a chronic sense of apprehension and the premonition of impending but unidentified disaster [...] Gothic heroes and heroines are on their own, stumbling alone, sometimes in foreign countries, through appalling complexities of decision and action, obliged to find their own solutions or go under; estrangement from family ties is their normal condition [...] Protagonists are frequently orphans, or they are foundlings or adopted, their family origins mysterious. (1981, 5)

Del Toro's placing of his protagonists in the context of an orphanage, with its dual role of home and prisonlike environment, and the specter's existence in the spatial underbelly of the school, at first fits squarely within the conventions of the Gothic mode. We are aware that within the tradition the elements of darkness, shadowy figures, and creaky interiors, coupled with stormy, unsettled exterior spaces, combine to provide a projection of unconscious trepidations at play (Aguirre 1998). The element of mystery, the supernatural order, the critical role of the building in its hosting of terrible past secrets and conflicts, alongside the presence (and temptation) of a hidden treasure (seen in the form of Republican gold), are all brought in to the filmic narrative in order to provide alliances with the Gothic tradition (Aguirre 1998; Briggs 2000). However, del Toro also reworks the Gothic mode in a number of sequences. I mentioned earlier Santi's first ghostly appearance to Carlos in broad daylight, which provides us with a key example of this idea. Del Toro's daylight specter presents the supernatural within the confines of the mundane, while abiding with the traditional values of the genre. But indeed throughout the film, del Toro plays with the binaries of darkness and light, good and evil, through his aesthetic choices. The bright, almost-sun-bleached lighting of the day scenes, which at first appears to go against the modes of the Gothic, are matched only by the dark, isolated and intensely suspenseful nighttime scenes. A reading of these aesthetic choices would suggest that del Toro presents the Gothic as constituting the fusion of binaries, where the elements of both good and evil are brought together within the same space. Light is therefore pitted against darkness and shadows. Saints and gargoyles coexist within the same architectural space, providing layers of meaning that exemplify what del Toro sees as the "anti-conventional, anti-establishment" and deeply political nature of the tradition (DVD extras).

Scholars of the genre concur that one of the establishing texts of the Gothic tradition was Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (Lee Six 2010; Potter 2005). The defining literary paradigm of the Gothic

novel, Walpole's narrative, begins with a murder when a large helmet falls from the sky and crushes one of the main characters, named Conrad, to death. The image of the helmet thereon remains present throughout the novel as a symbol of a terrible past crime. There are visual parallels made between the novel and *El espinazo*, particularly in the opening sequences of the film. We witness the crime committed against a child, causing his death, and almost immediately following this event, the bomb lands from the sky and assumes its position at the center of the patio. The image of the bomb in this context becomes symbolic of a past crime and a terrible secret lying dormant. Later in the film, the bomb leads Carlos to Santi's ghost, when the protagonist asks for the bomb's help in finding the specter and in solving the mystery of its appearances. The bomb makes an echoing noise, and one of its ribbons escapes to float toward the kitchen and thus leads Carlos toward his encounter with Santi's ghost. Davies writes on the significance of the bomb as emblematic of the external violence taking place and is somewhat symbolic of masculine aggression (2006, 144). In her analysis, the author suggests that throughout "the film there is an undercurrent of concern with questions of male virility. Del Toro posits this symbolically with the unexploded bomb in the courtyard of the home" (137). Thus, the bomb, in this context, is emblematic of a threatening and violent masculine virility, which is performed, according to Davies' analysis, through the aesthetically appealing body of Jacinto (143). It is also possible to argue that in addition to these readings of violent virility, the bomb can be read in other ways since it is presented as being deliberately ambiguous. While its stature and "suggestive angle" are more closely aligned with notions of potential phallic aggression, as Davies notes (138), the name in Spanish, "la bomba," like the gender of its noun, is equally suggestive of a feminine quality. Indeed, it does occupy a silent, almost protective position in the narrative, and it also leads Carlos to Santi's ghost, helping to solve the mystery of his disappearance. Del Toro describes the image of the bomb as an "iron mother" and confirms its dual role in watching over the boys, but also it reminds them (and the spectator) of the conflict taking place outside of the orphanage, of the past crime and of the impending doom of future events (DVD extras). The image of the bomb, therefore, is framed in a context that is almost maternal in nature. The bomb sits ticking quietly within the courtyard and acts as a constant reminder of the perils of war. And it is here where we see the articulation of one of del Toro's greatest concerns. War, in del Toro's mind, constitutes the most fearful of monsters precisely because "war lacks

reason and is, therefore, a monster found at the heart of the Gothic endeavor” (DVD extras). This relocating of Gothic anxieties into a modern context of war is one that drives the narrative for both *El espinazo* and *El laberinto*, the latter conceived as a sister project to *El espinazo*.

El espinazo received its world release to critical acclaim at the Toronto Film Festival on September 9, 2001; however, the events of 9/11, only a few days later, caused a profound existential crisis in the filmmaker. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, del Toro was plagued by the feeling that “everything I had to say about brutality and innocence, about war and innocence, became obsolete,” and it was from this position of questioning and discomfort that *El laberinto* was born (DVD extras). Concerns regarding the effects of conflict and the dehumanizing process aligned with the ruthless, methodical strategies of war find their way into the narrative of both *El espinazo* and its companion piece, *El laberinto*. In *El espinazo*, the senseless violence Jacinto unleashes upon the younger, more vulnerable inhabitants of the orphanage, as observed above, acts as a motif for the suffering inflicted upon the Spanish population at the hands of the Nationalist victors. The countless untold deaths and stories of the conflict link to the hauntologies of the Civil War prevalent in modern Spain’s cultural productions and contribute toward the contemporary “memory boom” as identified by Labanyi (2007, 89).

THE IMAGE

One of the means through which the past is recalled, recollected and, to a certain extent, authenticated is through photographic representation. Historically the photographic image has maintained a privileged position within the visual field. It has provided access toward a visualization of history and has helped shape a sense of national history, as seen in the case of the Casasola prints of the Mexican Revolution. The same case can be made for the Spanish Civil War, as Labanyi observes (2007, 100). The discovery of the now-termed “Mexican suitcase” in 2007 in Mexico City, which contained what has become one of the most important photographic collections of the Spanish Civil War, reminds us of this claim. Inside the suitcase were boxes that had over the years protected 4500 negatives from disrepair, each negative depicting a scene of conflict taken during the Spanish Civil War. These images have been accredited to the famed war photographers Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and David Seymour, whose work sheds new light on the visualizations of the Spanish Civil War. Since their

discovery the photographs have become critically important for historians of the Spanish Civil War and contribute toward the visualization of the effects of armed conflicts. Thus, the photographs from the Mexican suitcase illustrate the pivotal role the photographic image maintains in the process of the reappropriation of history and national discourse. Similarly, in *El espinazo* the photographic image is awarded a position of equal importance both in terms of its role in reliving the past in the present and through its influencing of the narrative events. In an important scene where we witness Jacinto looking at photographs of himself as a boy, we can observe the power of the image to instill a sense of nostalgia and conjure otherwise repressed emotions (Fig. 6.4).

The photographs in this scene point to Jacinto's unknown past, illustrating a personal history prior to his arrival at the orphanage. The images represent a (family) life that is now over, in the sense that his parents have perished. Furthermore, the value of these photographs is emphasized when it emerges that, before Jacinto finds them, the images had been kept securely (alongside other treasures) in Carmen's safe. On the back of a photograph, Carmen's handwriting encapsulates her reflections on this solitary figure when she writes, "How lonely the prince without a kingdom. The man without warmth," and thus summarizes in these few lines Jacinto's damaged emotional self. During a scene set around a campfire, and the night before his own death, Jacinto is fascinated by the



Fig. 6.4 Jacinto (Eduardo Noriega) observes a photograph of himself as a young boy. Still from *El espinazo del diablo*.

photographic image. He stares into it hoping to find answers to his own past, scratches at its blurry surface as if to uncover its secrets, and laments the loss of the innocent boy depicted within the photographic frame. The family portrait depicting his father, mother and him as a baby evokes a nostalgic longing in the adult Jacinto, demonstrating a vulnerable side that until now had been invisible from the spectator. Proud of his accountant father and adoring mother, Jacinto the orphan child reveals himself to the audience, and for a few moments the “monster” of the film is humanized. Del Toro has described this scene as an important moment in the film in that it defines Jacinto’s character (DVD extras). He is shown to have a level of emotional depth, and the revelation of a photographic image of himself opens up old, repressed emotions of abandonment and rejection in Jacinto. For a moment we glimpse the possible drives at the heart of his adult behavior, the isolation and sadness suffered as a child shaping the aggressive, vain and disdainful adult that he becomes.

Momentarily returning to Labanyi’s discussion on the function of family portraits during the Spanish Civil War observed above, we can see how an appreciation of the visual archive provides access to the medium’s re-visioning of history (2007, 100). Despite these suggestions, however, in relation to the photograph’s role in *El espinazo*, Labanyi posits that Jacinto “has no respect” for, and thus rebuffs, the photographs in favor of material gain (102). Taking into account Labanyi’s reading of the above scene, an alternate interpretation of Jacinto’s relationship with the photograph is also possible. Rather than viewing his interaction with the image as one lacking respect and therefore implying a rejection of the medium, the moments Jacinto spends observing his past photographic images, I argue, are of crucial importance to the narrative. The photographs that Jacinto gazes at strike an emotional chord, and for a few moments in the film we witness a different side to the otherwise resentful and angry proto-Fascist.

The photographs matter to Jacinto because they provide him with a link to his otherwise forgotten past. They act as a reminder of his heritage and of his origins prior to the orphanage, a reminder, furthermore, that he was once loved unconditionally. Moreover, the photographic image, following Jacinto’s death, is all that is left behind after he has drowned and his body has sunk to the bottom of the amber-colored pool. The images then float to the surface of the cistern as visual reminders of a life now lost, constituting traces of a past existence. Photography theory posits the notion that the photographic image, particularly within the genre of

portraiture, serves as a reminder of our own state of mortality (Sontag 1979). Thus, Jacinto's viewing of his own photographic image both lures him into a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era while at the same time predicts his own forthcoming demise.

The connection between the photographic image and mortality has been a topic of extensive discussion within the field (Barthes 1993; Perloff 2003; Phelan 2002; Sontag 1979) and, in this case, frames my reading of the role of the photograph in *El espinazo*. Jacinto's fascination with, and gazing at, the photographic image the night before his own death confirms what Susan Sontag sees as the role of the photograph acting as a "memento mori" (1979, 15). Moreover, she states that the act of photographing is to "participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality" (15). In this context, Roland Barthes' observations on the nature of photography and its relationship with death must also be taken into account since they expound the notion of mortality within the photographic frame. In his *Camera Lucida*, Barthes recognizes the indexical relationship that the photograph maintains with its referent. He further suggests that the referent and the photograph are "glued" together and that the essential feature of photography is the acute reading of something or someone that has at some point existed in time, or what he terms as the "*that-has-been*" (1993, 85). Consistent with the findings in every photograph, he argues, is "the return of the dead" (9), which is photography's ability to memorialize a person, while acknowledging that it is ultimately death that constitutes "the *eidos* of the Photograph" (15). Furthermore, Barthes describes the interaction of the gaze and the photographic image as a form of "spectacle" working within the confines of the performative. The overall process constitutes a "theatre of death" because photography "is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (32). Barthes' notion of "the return of the dead" therefore, reminds us of Sontag's assertions made above, and, as such, confirms the photograph's role as visual signifier of the subject's mortality and frames our readings of Jacinto's interaction with the photographic image. Del Toro's use of *mise-en-scène* involving the shots of Jacinto and the photographs is illustrative of Barthes' notion of the "return of the dead," since the scenes take place on the night before Jacinto's own death occurs. During the sequence around the campfire, Jacinto observes his photographic image, which in itself contains a double layer of meaning: Barthes' "*that-has-been*" is to be found in the vision of the innocent child that Jacinto no longer is, as well as its recalling

of the presence of death through the pictorial depiction of Jacinto's now-deceased parents. Of crucial significance, moreover, these scenes highlight the role that the photograph plays as a *memento mori* since Jacinto is seen spending the last night of his life looking at his own photographic reflection. This exercise of looking at one's photographic reflection confirms Sontag's notion of the subject's state of mortality within the photographic frame and references Jacinto's own proximate death in the scenes that follow.

Barthes' much-discussed concepts of the *studium* and the *punctum* within the photograph, moreover, allow for further explorations of the meanings assigned to the photographs in *El espinazo*. The studium's ability to indicate the contextual interplay between the referent and the image fits in with the sociohistorical framings of our readings of Jacinto's childhood photographs. The punctum's complexity is derived from the fact that it disturbs the studium and provides a "prick, wound or sting" to the observer and "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces" the spectator (Barthes 1993, 26). In this case, Jacinto, who is psychologically wounded already, is emotionally moved by the photographic image and is transported back to a past existence—back to a time before the pain and the solitude he must have suffered in the orphanage. Jacinto's gaze is captivated by his photographic image, and he scratches at its surface attempting to penetrate further in search of meaning. However, what lies beneath the surface of the photographic image is impending death, as Barthes highlights: "[The] *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die" (96).

Thus, the notion of the punctum, which conversely is the Latin term for "trauma," is significant to a reading of the process of the consumption of the image conducted by Jacinto's gaze. The punctum's power to draw him in and speak to his vulnerable nature provides new interpretive layers to our examinations of the scene and to Jacinto's character. Therefore, in addition to the punctum's action of metaphorically penetrating the visual field and piercing or holding the gaze, the punctum's role in the case of Jacinto's photograph acts as a reminder of the emotional value of the scene displayed and, through its very nature, the traumatic event of a loss of innocence that has become immortalized within the frame. The significance of the role of the image in determining Jacinto's death is reiterated in the closing scenes of the film mentioned above, where the floating

photographs allude to their role as visual traces of a past life now extinct and are present as a lingering legacy that match the phantasmal effects of the dead in the now-abandoned orphanage.

Guillermo del Toro's interpretation of one of many histories of the Spanish Civil War, therefore, as seen through the eyes of a group of young boys living in a desolate orphanage haunted by the ghost of a dead child, serves to provide insights into the director's own fascination with the Gothic mode, the consequences of war, and, crucially, the role of the image in constructing identities and establishing visual archives of the past. Del Toro's treatment of the specter in *El espinazo*, as explored so far in this chapter, demonstrates the continued presence of the ghost in popular culture and its significance (and relevance) to modern-day concerns, in addition to articulating historically unresolved traumas. Furthermore, the desire to represent the specter in a new light, as del Toro does with his creation of Santi's ghost, takes into account the paradoxes and contradictions of the spectral encounter, allowing for further discussion on this complex literary and filmic paradigm.

GHOSTS OF THE PRESENT: ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU'S *BIUTIFUL* (2010)

The specter returns to our screens in Alejandro González Iñárritu's Barcelona-based film, *Biutiful*. In Iñárritu's film, the hauntologies of the Civil War are alluded to through the main character's family history, which reveals a father who fled Franco's Spain in search of a life in exile in Mexico. The ghosts of the past permeate the present in *Biutiful*, where history repeats itself in the form of dead fathers and their unwitting abandonment of their offspring. The film opens and closes with a set of recurring images: a ring, two hands framed against the sound of whispered utterances, a dead owl lying still on the snow in an undisclosed forest location and two men talking and smiling at one another surrounded by somber, snow-laden trees. Although spectators are not made aware of this at the beginning of the film, the opening sequence imagines a posthumous encounter between Uxbal (Javier Bardem), the film's main protagonist, and his deceased young father (Nasser Saleh). The conversation maintained between the two men is repeated in the closing scene of the film, only this time the father leads Uxbal toward an unknown place off frame, a location suggestive of the afterlife. From the opening scenes, therefore, the presence of death

(embodied visually in the image of the owl) and the specter (presented to us through Uxbal and his father) is positioned at the forefront of the narrative reflection. From the outset, man's mortality is seen as the continuation of existence in an alternative form. The specter is visually present in the film when the spirit is unable to move on, and is desirous to confess, recover time or make amends with the living. Its presence is also reflective of Uxbal's state of mind—as a medium, he assists in the spirit's passing onto another realm; however, as a mortal he is plagued by a sense of guilt at having inadvertently caused multiple deaths, as in the case of the Chinese migrants in the basement sweatshop. And Uxbal's feelings of remorse manifest themselves as spectral visions that appear on the ceiling and take over as a form of psychological haunting. Contrary to del Toro's constructed ghostly apparitions which abide by the Gothic mode discussed above, *Iñárritu's* specter cohabits with the living, appears unexpectedly (often close to its material corpse) and fails to speak directly with Uxbal on the screen. We later learn of its thoughts and preoccupations when Uxbal passes on messages to loved ones, but as spectators we do not see direct interactions between the living and the dead. The interrelation of spaces between the mortals and immortal beings are deliberately made in the film so as to project a notion of the mundane, the everyday, where the living cohabit with the dead in a manner that moves away from magic realist or fantasy narrative frameworks. For the most part, the spiritual "gift" that Uxbal has inherited is shown as precisely that, which is one more characteristic of his persona that does not detract from an otherwise realistic context and does not add value to nor take it away from the overall existence maintained by the protagonist. When he is close to death himself, Uxbal's world between the living and the dying intermix in a cocktail of hallucinatory visions of his own image, as both spirit and decaying bodily form. The moths that accrue on his bedroom ceiling from the moment he is told that he has metastatic prostate cancer disappear on the night of his death. The two worlds of the living and the dead intertwine in a penultimate scene shared with his daughter Ana (Hanaa Bouchaib), where we learn that she too has inherited her father's gift, as she continues to maintain a conversation with Uxbal after he has passed away and his lips no longer move. This notion of continuity mirrors the circular structure of the film, the sense of life that does not end with death, as Bea (Ana Wagener), Uxbal's spiritual mentor, assures him after his diagnosis.

During one of the earlier sequences in the film, Uxbal visits a church where a vigil is being held for three boys who have been killed in a road

accident. Their grieving parents have invited Uxbal to attempt to make contact with the boys in the hope that they will be reassured of their well-being in the afterlife. Uxbal, however, can only speak with one boy, who confesses to having stolen his father's watch and, in guilt, asks for his forgiveness. This seemingly insignificant incident highlights the film's treatment of death as a quotidian feature of life. The dead, it seems, continue to feel human emotions even after their own demise. Death, in Iñárritu's world is complex, necessary and an inevitable process. The theme of death is one that prevails in both films analyzed so far in this study. The constant presence of death, the dead and the condition of mortality are explored in Iñárritu's *Biutiful*, where the protagonist is surrounded by spirits of the dead, and is haunted by his own impending demise. And in Cuarón's futuristic society, as we shall see, death is an inevitable conclusion as the human race appears to be slowly heading for extinction. Furthermore, human life in *Children of Men*, particularly those pertaining to the illegal migrant subjects, is disposable. Similarly, in *Biutiful*, Uxbal's witnessing of the effects of a mass-killing of the Chinese illegal migrants, who work in the sweatshop below the Catalan streets, testifies to the relentless conditions that they are forced to endure, their lives constituting disposable commodities that renders them victims of a global capitalist economic model. In the film, the Chinese migrants work long hours in the underground sweatshop making imitation designer handbags and pirate copies of DVDs, destined for the tourist crowds in Barcelona's central plazas. As Dolores Tierney (2018) notes, Iñárritu's film in its "close up, realist exploration of poverty and marginality represents Barcelona against the Catalan, chic modernist city of architect Antoni Gaudí" more commonly associated with the location, and viewed within a tourist paradigm (70). Instead, we see the Chinese migrants in the film sleeping in cramped and overcrowded conditions, in the same basement spaces where they also work during the day. Their food is scarce—hot tea and noodles. They sleep in their day clothes for warmth, a problem that Uxbal attempts to solve through his purchasing of mobile gas heaters. Once dead, the spirits of the Chinese workers remain as traces of a past unresolved crime. In this context, they embody Uxbal's sense of guilt in opting for the less expensive (and more dangerous) gas heaters, which ultimately causes them their death through carbon monoxide poisoning. In Iñárritu's Barcelona, the illegal migrants explored (which mainly consist of Chinese and Senegalese community members) are living in squalid conditions and are being paid below-average wages because of the threat of deportation back to an

impoverished and unstable home nation state. Moreover, the neoliberal economic model in place allows for an exploitation of these fictional Chinese migrants, reflecting the conditions of a number of other marginalized labor forces around the world, seen, for example, in the case of the *maquiladoras* (female factory workers) on the US-Mexico Border, or the factories in Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Bangalore in India, which service, among others, popular high street labels from the West. Thus, the neoliberal ideological imperative of prioritizing profit margins over production context, leads to the seeking of inexpensive economies (and therefore workforce) globally (Chomsky 1999). In the case of *Biutiful*, primarily it is the Chinese factory owner who privately hires and exploits his own compatriots with the aim of maximum sales profit. The incident of the death of the Chinese workers, therefore, reinforces the idea of the specters' presence in the film as being critical of the illegal immigrants' exploited condition. Such a stance serves to undermine the neoliberal rhetoric of a free market economy, which favors the deregulation of private sector enterprise and privatization, applicable across the globe. In fact, Blanco and Peeren (2013) go further, describing the neoliberal experience as being one that is spectral in nature, where they observe that:

the processes associated with the present-day spread of particular economic models (most prominently neoliberal capitalism) and new (social) media, which reconfigure the world as one of inescapable interconnection, have been conceived as spectral [...] and spectralizing (producing subjects that stand apart from the rest of society, either at the top, as unaccountable, or at the bottom, as expendable). (2013, 92–93)

Furthermore, the Chinese immigrants in the film, caught in the midst of a consumer culture with elevated demands for inexpensive imitation models, become what Blanco and Peeren term as “spectralized” subjects caught in the capitalist production logic of supply and demand (93). Their human lives are subsequently seen as dispensable, falling in line with the processes of production and disposability inherent within economic models of globalized neoliberalism. To this effect, in the film the factory owner answers to Uxbal's protests that there are plenty more workers in China willing to take his employees' place and labor for the limited wages they receive (Fig. 6.5).

These same workers, however, return to haunt Uxbal's psyche, and in their apparition they allude to the otherwise invisible nature of their once



Fig. 6.5 Uxbal (Javier Bardem) in a scene from *Biutiful* (2010)

human existence, both metaphorically and in material terms. Moreover, in the film the spectral form not only manifests itself as the materialization of guilt and suffering, but also maintains a political role. Here their presence in the film recalls the Marxist speculation on a spectral haunting in Europe, which in this case is not ideologically driven by communist thought, as predicted, but is shaped, as Derrida (1994) notes in his *Specters of Marx*, by global capitalist power structures. These specters are seen by Derrida as being multiple, and form part of an apocalyptic vision of the European socioeconomic condition that is haunted, in his view, by ten important plagues of the “new world order” (100–104), constituting what he sees as the spectropolitical nature of modern-day society. Summarizing Derrida’s ten plagues, Blanco and Peeren (2013) note that these consist of

Unemployment produced by deregulation, the exclusion of the homeless and other undesirable subjects, economic war, the contradictions of free market capitalism, the proliferation of foreign debt, the arms industry and trade, nuclear weapons, inter-ethnic wars [...] the ‘phantom-States’ of the mafia and drug cartels, and the limits of international law. (93)

While observing the speculative intellectual trajectory outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*, Derrida (1994) argues that Marx’s concern lies

with dissecting the spectrality of Europe's condition, and to do so he engages in the pursuit of a theoretical 'genealogy of ghosts' which leads to the definition of what he terms as the process of spectrally exorcising the "good" from the "bad," in political and ideological terms (133).

SPECTROPOLITICS

In their discussion on Derrida's notion of "spectropolitics," Blanco and Peeren observe the complexity inherent in fully grasping the issues that the term draws attention to, since in their view, spectropolitics remains concerned with "mobiliz[ing] spectrality" aiming to "diffuse operations and effects of present-day globalization, as well as to critique the way its processes produce certain subjects as consistently disenfranchised [...] or forced to live in extreme precarity" (93). These same spectral subjects are consequently found to occupy Judith Butler's thought in terms of the notion of a fragile state of humanness, as explored in her *Precarious Life*. In her study, Butler proposes that the process of "dehumanization becomes the condition civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human" (2006, 91). These same subjects, as Butler notes, remain located in a "field of would-be humans, the spectrally human" (91). Although applying her idea to a reading of the Guantanamo Bay inmates and their visual representation as one that determines and compounds the framing of the subject as spectral in nature, Butler's assertions of a classification of humanness according to a position of marginality is applicable to my reading of the spectral subject in *Biutiful*. The idea of a fragile marginal existence is crystallized in Iñárritu's depiction of the migrant workers as quintessentially spectral humans, living in a state of in-betweenness and lacking in agency. The Chinese workers in *Biutiful*, therefore, are spectral in nature even before their material existence has dissolved into a ghostly form in the narrative. Because of the sociopolitical contexts that have paved the way for the exploitative conditions of the sweatshops, alongside the globalized capitalist economy that has rewarded the Chinese enterprise, these spectral subjects remain on the periphery of society and are stripped of agency.

Commenting on the theoretically fluid character of the specter, Blanco and Peeren (2013) note that its presence is transnational in nature; crossing temporal, economic and physical borders. In fact, they argue, "[s]pectrality has also emerged as a figure of globalization, past and present" (92). Thus, the haunting condition impelled by the underpinnings of neoliberal

economic practice operating worldwide, and the effects these have on the spectral subject must be seen as of paramount importance to the political stance adopted by *Biutiful*. The film's inclusion of the Chinese workers, and to some extent the Senegalese street vendors, forms the crux of Iñárritu's critical engagement with the discourses of the Derridean new world order observed earlier. Set in the midst of a Barcelona experiencing the economic crisis of 2008, the labor-intensive, exploited living and working conditions faced by the Chinese and Senegalese migrants mirror the plight of illegal immigrants found on a global scale. The mass migration of civilians, as a consequence of global capitalism, environmental disasters and sociopolitical unrest, moreover, has gradually shaped modern living conditions into a two-tier social structure in these spaces, sustained by what Avery Gordon (2008) considers to be a form of "racial capitalism" (xv). The infernal conditions of the sweatshops in Iñárritu's Barcelona, moreover, predict the apocalyptic future of a notional fortress Europe as conceived of by Cuarón's *Children of Men*, discussed below. In this context, society is afflicted by the aftereffects of an unknown pestilence that has left the human race infertile. In a context where the Derridean ten plagues of the new world order have unleashed their force onto a global context, we witness in Cuarón's film the destabilization of the world's nations and their economies to the point of widespread anarchy. In this framework of social disorder, the United Kingdom remains as the only nation with a government still in place, constituting a prime destination for refugees seeking solace from the violent conflict unraveling in their own nations. In response to the growing claims for asylum, the United Kingdom has become a militarized police state in *Children of Men*, where interstate abuse and injustice permeate in the nation's refugee camps.

EUROPE IN THE FUTURE: CUARÓN'S APOCALYPTIC WORLD IN *CHILDREN OF MEN*

Returning to Derrida's prescriptive new world order discussed above, it is possible to view Cuarón's interpretation of the P. D James novel of the same name, as a commentary on contemporary Britain (and by the same token, the rest of Europe) through his visualization of a dystopian, destabilized future, where governments no longer function and society has become defunct. The causes of the futuristic apocalyptic social condition depicted in *Children of Men* are found to have resulted from a flu

pandemic, unexplained global infertility, violent conflict, and an aging population slowly marching toward self-destruction. Furthermore, in the film the prevalence of fear propels state governance and keeps society in check in the context of possible urban rebellion. In *Children of Men*, there exists a group known as the Fishes, who purport to fight for the equal rights of the many refugees facing deportation in the United Kingdom, and condemn the government's treatment of the perceived illegal communities. However, we later learn that they too have a hidden agenda, and their desire to take ownership of refugee Kee's (Clare-Hope Ashitey) new baby, the first to have been born in eighteen years, is politically motivated. As observed above, in Cuarón's vision Britain stands isolated in its position as the sole nation still maintaining a functioning government, although this governing body is treated ironically in the film. In this classically Orwellian climate, the populace is fed nationalist propaganda via a state-controlled media, in an attempt to restore a sense of order. We see posters proclaiming that "Britain Soldiers On," which, through their designs recalls the government publicity campaigns in circulation during the First and the Second World Wars, in an effort to raise public morale. In *Children of Men*, the conditions affecting the remainder of the world has forced mass migration to Britain on an unprecedented scale, with emergency refugee camps emerging as mechanisms of control and social exemption. In recent years, there has been a substantial amount of scholarly work conducted on the nature and presence of the refugee camp in *Children of Men*, showing how its significance lies in the mimetic relationship this hybrid space maintains with the realities of contemporary Britain (Woolley 2014; Brown 2013; Latimer 2011; Amago 2010; Stratton 2009). In his depiction of the Bexhill refugee camp, Cuarón, as critics have noted, reaches out to other representations of illegal detention and torture centers found around the globe (Woolley 2014). The camp itself, once entered, resembles an in-between urban environment, where residents await their deportation date, and in the process have created an illegitimate cityspace complete with groups of street vendors, gamblers, smugglers and inner-city rebellions that mirror the funeral processions of Palestinian freedom fighters (signified by their green flags of Hamas), set among abandoned architectural constructions. It is in one of these abandoned buildings that the army offensive against the rebels takes place, and it is here where Kee delivers her baby, the first "miracle" birth to have occurred in eighteen years (Fig. 6.6).



Fig. 6.6 Theo Faron (Clive Owen) and Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) with the latter's newborn baby, as they attempt to escape from the bombing at the Camp. Still from *Children of Men* (2006)

Outside, the scene of low-intensity warfare threatens to spill out of the camp and into the terrain of the rest of Britain. This dangerous predicament is heightened when the Fishes, having proclaimed a revolution, venture forth inside the refugee space in search of Kee and her baby. All the while during their search for Kee, the Fishes continue to fight against the army and the refugee resistance movement who are also engaged in violent conflict with one another, emphasized through their bombing of the temporary civilian housing blocks.

THE CAMP

When Theo (Clive Owen), Miriam (Pam Ferris) and Kee arrive by bus at the camp, the scenes in the background are ones of despair and destruction, as the images convey evidence of military and state corruption through their engagement in the torture and abuse of the spectral refugee subjects lined up outside of the bus. All of this destruction features as the backdrop to the scenes recorded by Cuarón's internal camera, which is shooting from inside the moving bus. In his commentary on *Children of Men*, Slavoj Žižek (2009) notes that the events taking place in the background of the scenes must be viewed as crucial to our understanding of

the power dynamics at play, both within the representation being observed and in the narrative as a whole (DVD extras). Žižek notes that the tension between the foreground and the background, also present in Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*, constitutes what he terms as the "paradox of the anamorphosis," defined as a "part of the picture which, when we look at the picture in a direct frontal way, appears as a meaningless stain, [but] acquires the contours of a known object when we change our position and look at the picture from aside" (Žižek 2009). Thus, the gaze is kept constantly occupied as Cuarón demands attention be paid to the events taking place both within the bus and outside of the vehicle. As the bus arrives at the camp, the camera focuses on the events taking place outside of the vehicle's windows, where the refugees are shown to be contained in cages, with some being threatened at gunpoint. When in motion the bus passes a row of hooded, unclothed and, in one particular case, tortured subjects, constituting images that visually recall the depicted scenes of mistreatment captured by the clandestine camera in the detention centers of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. The spectacle of violence that processes past the bus window, therefore, forms part of a carefully constructed mise-en-scène that allows Cuarón to reference contemporary depictions of abuse within the war prison(s) that were circulated globally by mainstream media outlets, and which, once surfaced, provoked a public outcry. In her analysis on the figure of the black heroine in *Children of Men*, Jayna Brown (2013) observes that in its portrayal of the refugee camp

[the] film mixes a familiar evocation of the German holocaust with nightmare visions of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the tortures of Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. It foresees a future of total militarization and the development of a global prison industrial complex. (126)

In relation to the spectral subject detained at Abu Ghraib, Judith Butler in her *Frames of War* (2009) centers her discussion on the role the image plays in its depiction of the wounded, tortured body held within the confines of the war prison. During her analyses on the nature of framing and representation in relation to war photography, and in particular those depicting the Abu Ghraib inmates during the Second Gulf War, Butler ponders on the ethical, political and ideological effects of the consumption and visualization of these same problematic images. Within her discussions, Butler suggests that a paradigm of representation emerges in relation to the photographs of the dehumanized Abu Ghraib subject. In this

context, Butler observes that the instrumental obscuring of the subject's features, in this case conducted through the use of a black hood, ensures that the restriction of "how and what we see" takes place (2009, 66). She goes on to note that this exercise, while forming a means for exerting control over the tortured body, guarantees "in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception" (66). Butler therefore suggests that within the field of vision mechanisms come into place to ensue what can and cannot be seen, and thus becoming deprived of view or alternately consumed by the public gaze. The prisoner's face, and therefore the spectral subject's identifying features, thus is rendered invisible through the process of veiling. Their political invisibility is emphasized through their lack of full visual representation. During a tense scene held outside of the detention center in *Children of Men*, the character of Miriam is escorted off the bus in an effort to distract the inspecting soldier from Kee's early labor pains. Once positioned alongside other dissidents and detained subjects, we observe (occurring outside of the bus window) the swift action of a soldier placing a black hood over Miriam's head. And within a fraction of a second the bus drives away, and we are left deprived of any further evidence as to what happens to this character, as she too becomes invisible and melts into the crowds. The action of obscuring Miriam's facial features with the use of a symbolic item, such as the black hood, not only recalls the images of the Abu Ghraib inmates mentioned above, but also equates her character with other victims of sovereign abuses of power. The hooding of Miriam's face, furthermore, constitutes the first sign of a process of dehumanization of her character, and deprives the subject of the ability to see and be seen, rendering her faceless and without agency. At this precise moment in the narrative, and with the action of her veiling, Miriam symbolically becomes another *homo sacer*, joining the multiethnic group of social exiles in the refugee camp, to use Giorgio Agamben's analogy (1998) discussed below.

The depiction of Bexhill camp in *Children of Men*, therefore, deliberately fuses visual referents from contemporary spaces of conflict and detention. The camp in the film is both a battleground playing host to the clash unfolding between the Fishes, the army and other unidentified rebellious groups, as well as the marginal space where refugees are gathered and housed, away from the rest of society. The camp forms the carnivalesque site that is home to the multiethnic subjects awaiting deportation, as shown in the early scenes when Theo arrives at Bexhill and is led by Marichka (Oana Pellea) to a safe haven where Kee gives birth. And it

becomes the hybrid space where a new beginning, in the form of Kee's baby, is born. However, despite these multiple roles, Bexhill Camp maintains its key position as a site of repression, lawlessness and detention, containing subjects who are deemed illegal and, therefore, socially undesirable. It is no coincidence then that the entry point to Bexhill Camp resembles a prisonlike concentration site for dissidents. We see cages and scenes of public humiliation, violence and torture, contained within what Butler (2006) labels as the "new war prison" (95). Coinciding with my reading of the refugee space in Cuarón's film, Butler proposes that the new war prison

literally manages populations, and thus functions as an operation of governmentality. At the same time, however, it exploits the extra-legal dimension of governmentality to assert a lawless sovereign power over life and death. In other words, the new war prison constitutes a form of governmentality that considers itself its own justification and seeks to extend that self-justificatory form of sovereignty through animating and deploying the extra-legal dimension of governmentality. (95)

We witness an exploration of these concepts at various moments in the film's narrative. Even before the characters have arrived at Bexhill, there are examples of Butler's notion of the new war prison portrayed in the film. The images of the detainees that pass outside of the bus window in *Children of Men*, for example, directly reference the images of tortured inmates at both Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay mentioned above. These same images have since become global embodiments of a prison system that operates firmly outside of the parameters of international law, and which, in the eyes of the sovereign, positions the victims, as Butler asserts, within the marginal, spectral realms of the less than human. In *Precarious Life*, Butler questions the mechanisms in place that define a human life and its loss, which maintain a sense of what she terms "grievability" (XIV) and therefore a sense of value. In relation to the experiences of the Guantanamo Bay inmates, she observes that the process highlights "political implications of those normative conceptions of the human that produce, through an exclusionary process, a host of 'unlivable lives' whose legal and political status is suspended" (2006, XV). An important component to this "exclusionary process" is the construction of detention units which have the aim of holding the spectral subject within the confines of a purposely built non-place. In this instance, Butler

observes that the dehumanizing process is further “effected by ‘indefinite detention’ [which] makes use of an ethnic frame for conceiving who will be human, and who will not” (XVI). The structure that allows for this process to take place, therefore, is centered on what the author notes is the dichotomy of governmentality and sovereignty. Engaging with Foucault’s notion of “governmentality,” Butler further proposes:

Governmentality is broadly understood as a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population. Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when law is understood as a ‘set of tactics’, and through forms of state power, although not exclusively. (2006, 52)

In the chapter entitled “Indefinite Detention,” Butler addresses the mechanisms in place that reposition the detainee as a nonhuman, and notes that such labeling, driven by fear but delivered under the pretext of homeland security, strips the spectral subject of legitimate rights. Outlining the distinction between governmentality, represented by government agencies and its institutions, set against sovereignty, a much more transient concept compiled of individuals and managerial systems, Butler observes that in the case of Guantanamo the dynamics of such power structures is ethically problematic. In this context, the author concludes that government officials exert an extralegal power that enables them to “deem” a person as dangerous and, in the process, renders them a menace to society. These actions of “deeming” an individual, constitute, in Butler’s eyes, “a sovereign power, a ghostly and forceful resurgence of sovereignty in the midst of governmentality” (2006, 59). Such sovereign powers tend to thrive in a climate of fear where the “act of ‘deeming’ takes place in the context of a declared state of emergency” (59). This same action of “deeming” is preceded by a state of indefinite detention which Butler suggests constitutes “an illegitimate exercise of power [which is] part of a broader tactic to neutralize the rule of law in the name of security” (67). Such tactics, which operate extralegally within the war prison, pave the way for the categorization of the spectral subject as less-than-human, leading to an abuse of sovereign power (represented in the soldiers), as visualized in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay images of tortured inmates discussed above. In order to explore the social condition of the war prison inmates, Butler

borrows from Agamben's notion of the *homo sacer* (sacred man) and equates the inmates' predicament with that of the spectral subject. In this context, Butler observes, the inmates' status is "deprived of rights, of citizenship," where the subject "enters a suspended zone, neither living in the sense that a political animal lives, in community and bound by law, nor dead, and therefore, outside the constituting condition of the rule of law" (67). This life lived in the suspended zone is what Agamben (1998) refers to as a "bare life," which works in contrast to a notion of an existence partaking in political community life, or *bios politikon*, (Butler 2006, 67). In his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben analyzes a figure contained within Roman law which raises some fundamental issues in terms of the nature of law and power in general, known as the *homo sacer*. Agamben explains that under the Roman Empire, a man who committed a serious crime was banned from society, and all of his rights as a citizen were revoked. He thus became a *homo sacer*, living outside of society's norms and legislature. As a consequence, his marginal status meant that paradoxically the *homo sacer* could be killed by anybody, but, legally, his life was deemed as "sacred" and, therefore, he could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony (12). The *homo sacer*, moreover, lived his "bare life" in isolation from society, and was deprived of any engagement with the community's political life. Furthermore, in order to explore the tensions between governmentality and sovereignty, Agamben uses the case of the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War as an exploratory premise from which to engage in discussions on social exclusion. Further on in his analysis of these states of exception, Agamben explores the figure of the refugee in recent history, as a figurative model of exclusion.

A number of critics have analyzed the role of the refugee in *Children of Men*, and specifically the figure of the maternal evacuee as constituting an example of Agamben's notion of the *homo sacer* (Trimble 2011; Sparling 2014). However, in her article "Bio-Reproductive Futurism Bare Life and the Pregnant Refugee in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," Heather Latimer (2011) has critiqued what she sees as the gendered position of Agamben's *homo sacer* paradigm in her examination of Cuarón's film. In her analysis, Latimer also contests Žižek's interpretation of *Children of Men* as one that works within the biopolitical framework. She contends that Kee's status as a refugee, *homo sacer* and fetishized mothering figure locates her within the spectrum of exception, and yet the position of "fetal citizenship" that her unborn baby maintains threatens to exclude her

further (60). Latimer proposes that if Kee “is originally subject to bare life through her status as a refugee, she is then resubjected to another form of bare life through her reproductive body” (59). Latimer notes that as a refugee “Kee may be abandoned by the state through laws like the USA Patriot Act, but she is further marginalized through her vulnerability to other forms of sovereignty focused on her pregnant body” (59). It would seem that Kee’s body, therefore, symbolically and systemically becomes the site of contention and paradox in the film. However, within the discourses of biopolitics, Latimer suggests that *Children of Men*

shows us how it is possible to be politically protected but not yet physically alive through its focus on the status of the unborn child. Kee’s body becomes the battleground for these two opposing forces as the film offers a critique of the politics of migration at the same time as it fetishizes the future child. (53)

Latimer therefore provides us with an interesting problematic associated with the one potent symbol of hope in the film, seen in the figure of the baby. Through her bare life condition, which is compounded by her pregnant body, alongside the color of her skin, Kee, Latimer argues, is deprived of agency (Fig. 6.7).

Furthermore, Latimer suggests that the film’s discourse engages with and problematizes Agamben’s notion of bare life, working within the framework of what she terms as “bio-reproductive futurism” (53). Borrowing from Lee Edelman’s notion of “reproductive futurism” in his work *In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Latimer sustains that reproductive futurism functions as the “process in which the image of the future child comes to stand in for the very idea of the future itself” (65). She further argues that key to reproductive futurism is the image of the child which acts as an emblem of the future, giving way to the processing of a fantasy associated with a return to childhood and, by the same token, to a state of innocence (65). Within this context the future and future children must be protected at all costs. Working within a Lacanian framework, Latimer argues that reproductive futurism weaves a fantastical illusion that forms part of the symbolic in that it provides the ego with the possibilities of concealing the realities of life’s fragility and, consequently, an avoidance of the death drive (65). Applying these insights to a reading of Kee’s role in the film, Latimer notes that the character is “reduced to her reproductive function in the film, while the fetus, and by

Fig. 6.7 Kee in a scene from *Children of Men*.



extension the child, comes to represent the natural inspiration, if not the solution, to a world of terrorism, despair, and fascism”(65). Hence, the focus of the film’s narrative drive is the safety and survival of the unborn baby, and Theo is given the command of protecting it and its mother. Kee, moreover, serves as the vehicle through which the world is provided with its first symbol of hope in eighteen years. She, as Latimer observes, constitutes a vessel of “futurity,” and thus Kee’s position in the narrative is symbolic and associated with lack, solely maintaining a biologically reproductive role in the film, where it “matters little what she thinks or has to say, or what happens to her, as the focus is her future child and futurity itself” (66). The ending of the film, where Kee has fled the now-endangered zone of the refugee camp, in search of the boat aptly named the “Tomorrow,” is deliberately ambiguous. Theo dies peacefully from his wounds, and Kee is left to fend for herself on a rowing boat with her newborn in her arms, just as the “Tomorrow” is seen to appear through the mist. The “Tomorrow” is owned by the Human Project, a clandestine operation seeking to secure the survival of the human race through science and the offer of protection. Žižek has commented that the concluding framed image of Kee bobbing about on a rowing boat is critical to our

understanding of the position of the refugee and, in this case, of Kee herself. The boat, as Žižek observes, is rootless, and floats adrift without any concise direction. He speculates this image to be symbolic of the condition of the refugee, without roots and without a fixed location (DVD extras). The question of the future of Kee, her baby and indeed of the survival of humanity itself is left unanswered by the film's ending. And rather than providing rhetorical speculations on salvation and/or destruction, Cuarón chooses instead to rely upon ambiguity and perhaps in the process provides a conclusion to his film that is more powerful through its silence.

To summarize, the three directors analyzed in this chapter have provided their audiences with differing visions of Europe, while each film focuses on very different historical moments. Del Toro, as observed, in both his films set in Spain, centers his narratives squarely within the context of the Civil War, and provides the child protagonist with the space in which to embark on a fantastical adventure that will reveal hidden secrets and unravel forgotten moments from the past. Flirting with familiar generic formulas, such as the Gothic mode, del Toro offers a cinematic vision of a Spain that remains haunted by its past, embodied in the form of a child-ghost. The spectral presence maintains prime position in Iñárritu's representation of a modern Spanish society, which has been shaped by its past and now stands economically and politically linked to a unified Europe. The isolation suffered as a consequence of the Civil War and subsequent Francoism has been left in the past, and Spain now plays host to a steady stream of immigration from sub-Saharan and Far Eastern nations, as explored in *Biutiful*. The hybrid city of Barcelona is projected onto the screens in an attempt to scrutinize its position within a globalized economic environment which, through late capitalism, has shaped modern Catalan society beyond recognition. These migratory movements continue as a major theme in Cuarón's own projection of Europe's future, as explored in his *Children of Men*. Moreover, notions of spectrality are embodied in the figure of the marginal refugee subject and, as I have observed in my analysis in this chapter, remain critical to our readings of the film. The future is depicted as a fortress Europe struggling to maintain the closure of its borders, epitomized in the visualization of a future Britain, where sovereignty underscores the neofascist and xenophobic agenda of governmental strategies of social control.

All three directors analyzed in this chapter have provided cinematic explorations of the discourses that are crucial to an understanding of past,

present and an imagined future Europe. And in doing so, del Toro, Iñárritu and Cuarón have examined the social problems facing the region through their representations of past and present Spain, alongside a dystopian view of a futuristic British society. Furthermore, as observed at the beginning of this chapter, all three films through their sources of funding, crew, casting and locations have been defined as transnational in nature (Shaw 2013; Tierney 2018), providing multiple readings of a global discourse that is applicable across nations and borders. What is also critical to our understanding of this growing transnational trajectory in Mexican filmmaking is the acknowledgment of the considerable visibility that the ‘three amigos’ have awarded to their national cinema, while simultaneously highlighting the fluid nature of movie-making in the neoliberal global sphere. In this case, del Toro, González Iñárritu and Cuarón illustrate the tendency that Sánchez Prado (2014) ascertains is “an engagement with the ways in which their work negotiates constraints and bonds of national identity, while recognizing their ability to circulate through both the networks of ‘globalized integration’ and the different instances of ‘localized expression’ present in their work” (157). I would, however, go further in this observation and argue that while the “three amigos” have indeed done much to make accessible and visibilize Mexican cinema internationally, they have also been able to successfully tap into national sensibilities in whichever territories they happen to be filming, regardless of whether these be Mexican or not. So, for example, the Spanish Civil War is examined in the context of a national trauma that has shaped the modern nation seen in both del Toro and Iñárritu’s films analyzed in this chapter, while Europe’s fears of growing immigration and increasing political discord are explored in Cuarón’s dystopic analogy of an island nation state, which is driven to a sense of isolationism by prevailing far right ideological discourse.

Moreover, while Del Toro, González Iñárritu and Cuarón have indisputably contributed toward the transnational tendencies of contemporary cinema, a number of other, lesser-known films emerging from Mexico have also sought to experiment with the practice, shaping their narratives around the notion of transnationalism in terms of production context, funding, narrative, language(s) used and location, while exploring the effects of globalization, violent conflict and (human) displacement, as we shall see in the next chapter. In the case of Cuarón’s *Children of Men*, explored above, Shaw (2013) has observed that it constitutes an “ideal model case study for a transnational film” in that through its

“transnational modes of production, distribution, and exhibition” it fits within what the author describes as the “conceptualisation of the cinema of globalization, and shares the concerns of exilic and diasporic filmmaking of the position of migrants” (202). In this chapter, we have seen how the notion of cinema being employed to examine the displaced experience of migrants in terms of their diasporic position within the frame, as examined in both *Biutiful* and in *Children of Men*. My analysis has also drawn attention to the precarious geopolitical status of the migrant figure, seen in the image of the refugees in both Iñárritu and Cuarón’s films examined in this book. These ideas will continue to frame my next chapter where the analysis will focus on the multidirected film *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (*Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer*), (dir. Racine et al. 2002), a text which by its very nature, format and directorial structure points toward the transnational tendencies of contemporary filmmaking, as we shall see, while also exploring the limitations and deterioration of the human mind, troubled and shaped by trauma.

NOTES

1. *Gravity* also won seven Oscars at the Academy Awards that year, including Best Editing and Best Cinematography. It also received six awards from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts which included Best Director.
2. *Roma* was the first Mexican film to win at the Academy Awards in the category of Best Foreign Film.
3. Lubezki won the Academy Award the previous year for Best Cinematography with Cuarón’s film *Gravity* (2013).
4. *The Shape of Water* won four Academy Awards (Best Picture, Best Original Music Score, Best Production Design and Best Director) from a total of thirteen Oscar nominations that year.

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Textual Hybridities in *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (2002)

Nos interesaba sobre todo jugar con las posibilidades que ofrece el cine. Materiales, estilos, formatos, géneros [...] todo para dar carta de existencia a una realidad inventada o mejor dicho para transformar en verdadero un material falso. (Villaronga in Racine et al. 2002, 34)

We were interested in the possibilities that cinema has to offer. Materials, styles, forms, genres [...] anything that could give credence to an invented reality, or better said, to transform false material into reality.

Until now we have seen how the fiction films examined have addressed social preoccupations and concerns as expressed on the screen both in Mexico and abroad. Mexican directors have engaged with the context of production of their films to formulate narratives that speak of a society that is witness to conflict, instability and regime change such as in the case of Alberto Cortés' *Corazón del tiempo* (*Heart of Time*) (2009), explored in Chap. 2, and political deviations explored in Chap. 3's analysis of Jorge Ramírez Suárez's *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*) (2004). The films analyzed in this book so far have examined notions of fiction and reality on the screen, as we have seen in Chap. 3, with Carlos Bolado's *Colosio: El asesinato* (*Colosio: The Assassination*) (2012), and a number of them have explored the effects of violence upon the individual and the collective, with particular attention paid to the so-called narco conflict, as

explored in Chaps. 4 and 5. Notwithstanding these observations, the effects of sociopolitical discord, economic instability and violence in European countries have also been treated on the screen as I explored in Chap. 6's films *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*) (2001), *Biutiful* (2010) and *Children of Men* (2006). This and the next chapter will address similar concerns, which until now have been pivotal to the explorations taking place on the screen, but veer into new directions, with the incorporation of a multi-generic docu-fictional piece, *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (*Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer*) (Racine et al. 2002a), and in Chap. 8, the short documentary by Tatiana Huezo entitled *Ausencias* (*Absences*) (2015). With both of these films the trajectory of visual storytelling is explored, alongside an examination of internal spaces of suffering, neglect and loss taking center stage. Whether it be through the use of visual textures, filmic hybridities, sound, color and light, film is used as a testimonial vehicle through which the experiences of grief, the effects of trauma and the element of loss upon the individual's emotional universe are explored in both *En la mente* and in *Ausencias*. How the loss of a beloved one can have an impact on one's life is the narrative drive for both of these films, where, in the case of *En la mente*, the grief-stricken protagonist is driven to insanity and criminality, and in the case of Lourdes, the subject in Huezo's documentary in the next chapter, the mothering figure is held in a perpetual state of mourning, living with the absence of her loved ones who are the victims of enforced disappearances.

ARO TOLBUKHIN: EN LA MENTE DEL ASESINO

Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino is a Mexican-Spanish co-production with three directors (Issac-Pierre Racine, Agustín Villaronga and Lydia Zimmerman), and tells the story of Aro Tolbukhin, a Hungarian merchant mariner who in the early 1980s was found guilty of causing the deaths of seven people in an infirmary in Guatemala. Although Tolbukhin confessed to these and a further seventeen other murders, since his trial and subsequent death, his culpability was called into question because of evidential and testimonial accounts that have since emerged. The film deliberately plays with the concepts of fiction and reality, as mentioned above, in order to pave the way for an exploration of re-created internal worlds.

The film incorporates a multiplicity of cinematic techniques and styles in order to unearth the origins of the protagonist's psychosis. Furthermore, *En la mente* seeks to expose the "real" Aro Tolbukhin, through the use of a varied cinematic format that integrates both the fictional and factual accounts of the man, his life, and his (possible) mental demons. Ultimately the film aims to examine the probable reason(s) behind Aro Tolbukhin's crimes, filling the visual voids with borrowed memories which are then re-created on the screen. During these moments, the narrative framework provides interviews that are juxtaposed with fictionalized episodes, which in turn are intertwined with voiceover commentary, musical motifs and selected footage from documentary reels. Despite these narrative attempts (and perhaps deliberately so), what the spectator is left with is an additional questioning of who Tolbukhin really was. The result is a mystified and obscured vision of Tolbukhin which questions his very existence. This chapter will question the methods of the film's constructed narratives, which appear to rely on psychoanalytical tools for interpreting the human psyche and work within a multi- and inter-generic framework. In addition, the analysis will address some of the issues raised through the film's intentional blurring of fiction with reality, set within a psychodynamic framing of the narrative which aims to expose the motives behind the crimes committed by delving into the mind of a killer.

En la mente del asesino is set in three different locations, with two of these being in Europe and two found in Central America. It is comprised of an international cast that includes the main character played by popular Mexican actor Daniel Giménez Cacho, three international directors, four languages spoken in the film(s) and a fictional, documentary, short film and super 8 home movies woven together to tell the story of a serial killer purported to be named as Aro Tolbukhin. The inter-generic quality of the text points toward is it as pertaining to the practice of docu-fiction, and its sources of funding, production, location and distribution, illustrate its quintessentially transnational character. For the benefit of the analyses that will take place in this chapter, a brief observation on what is meant by the term "transnationalism" and its application to a reading of *En la mente del asesino* will take place, since it is a film that bears the hallmarks of a transnational text but has yet to receive substantial critical scrutiny.

THE TRANSNATIONAL FILM

The transnational tendencies of recent filmmaking emerging from Latin America, and in particular from Mexico, has seen something of a boom in recent years. As we saw in Chap. 6, where I discussed the “three amigos” of Mexican cinema, the boundary-breaking success stories of current filmmaking by Mexican directors has paved the way for further analysis and scrutiny of what this means in terms of the transnational. The success of films made by Mexican filmmakers abroad has steadily seen critical interest rise, with a focus specifically on a number of key directors and their outputs as examples of a growing filmic trend that veers toward the transnational. There has been a number of excellent scholarly work recently on transnational filmmaking (Tierney 2018; Shaw 2013; Barrow 2013; Sánchez Prado 2014; Balanzategui 2018 etc.), which, among others, have included discussions on the Mexican directors Iñárritu, del Toro and Cuarón, and their position in the globalized, digitalized filmmaking industry. Despite these cases, however, my attention has often been drawn to the lesser known work by Mexican directors, and in this book I have attempted to include a balance of both commercially successful, internationally renowned filmmakers, with the work of less familiar auteurs, who have contributed toward the dominant social discourses of their time. *Corazón del tiempo* in Chap. 2, for example, fits in with this category, where we see the film’s observations on the autonomous existence of an EZLN community living in post-conflict Chiapas toward the beginning of the millennium. Similarly, Tatiana Huezo’s short film, *Ausencias*, examined in Chap. 8, engages with the emotional imperative at the heart of enforced disappearances in Mexico, and in particular the experience of maternal mourning in the context of recent *levantones*. This chapter will address the multinational and multilingual film *En la mente del asesino*, an ambitious project that delves into the mind of a serial killer via a filmic tapestry that demarcates the transnational in practice. Despite receiving critical acclaim at its release, *En la mente* remains underrepresented within discussions of transnational cinemas from both sides of the Atlantic.

Scholars agree that it is difficult to define the meaning of the concept of ‘transnationalism’ providing a theoretically ambiguous platform from where to observe international, intergeneric, multinational, (dis)placed and multilingual filmic narratives (Lefere and Lie 2016; Ezra and Rowden 2006; Shaw 2013; Tierney 2018). As Dolores Tierney (2018) highlights, the notion of transnationalism can be viewed as a “hold-all term, capable

of describing a range of complex extra-national practices in contemporary and earlier modes of funding, production and distribution of films” (5). However, she warns that the very same openness and fluidity of the term risks “the kind of plurality where it can simultaneously ‘mean anything and everything’ *and* consequently nothing in particular” (6). This same ambiguity at once serves to illustrate the complexity inherent in the concept, which attempts to address the globalization discourses of contemporary filmmaking, while also highlighting the limitations of capital within the industry that have led to increasing the search for other avenues of production, distribution and promotion. In this context, Shaw provides examples of what she calls the “sub-categories” of transnationalism, in an attempt to define the practice in recent filmmaking, with some of these features including

transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition; transnational modes of narration; cinema of globalisation; films with multiple locations; exilic and diasporic filmmaking; film and cultural exchange; transnational influences; transnational critical approaches, transnational viewing practices; transregional or transcommunity films; transnational stars; transnational directors; the ethics of transnationalism; transnational collaborative networks; and national films. (2013, 10)

By its very nature, *En la mente* abides by the conventions of the transnational filmic text described by Shaw above in that it is shot in four different (international) locations (Guatemala, Mexico, Hungary and Barcelona), it is a Spain-Mexico co-production, it has multiple directors, two from Spain and one from Canada, and we hear Hungarian, Catalan, Castilian and indigenous Mayan languages spoken in the film. The main protagonist is played by a Mexican actor, and the original 1980 documentary reels used in the film showing interviews held with an incarcerated Tolbukhin were produced by a French production company and held at the TSR Studios in Paris. Despite its hybrid construction of cast, crew, location and sources of funding, *En la mente* was submitted to represent Spain in competition for the Academy Awards in 2003 under the category of Best Foreign Film.¹ In the same way that questions were raised at del Toro’s film *Pan’s Labyrinth* and González Iñárritu’s *Biutiful* for being submitted as Mexico’s entry to the Academy Awards under the classification of Best Foreign Film, despite both films being filmed in Spain and employing predominantly Spanish actors, so too was the Mexico-Spain

co-production of *En la mente del asesino* as Spain's entry in 2003 a controversial choice. It is perhaps in the midst of this ever-shifting terrain of international film narratives, co-productions, multinational crews and locations that transnationalism offers us some insights into understanding the globally fluid nature of filmmaking and the industry that sustains it. In addition to the traditional co-production structures, which have included Canal +, Channel 4 Films and TVE working with Latin American private film companies and government agencies, recent developments have extended distribution parameters in the digital era. In a context of global audiences accessing Latin American films at festivals, and the increasing presence of digital distribution platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Video, Hulu, HBO, among others, alongside the development of online streaming forums, the making and consumption of films has never been more prolific. Several of the films examined in this book have demonstrated transnational tendencies such as, *Conejo en la luna*, explored in Chap. 3, which, for example, is filmed in both Mexico City and in London, employing the use of English and Spanish, and the main characters are played by both British and Mexican actors. The main plot is driven by the events taking place in Mexico City, and concerns a British/Mexican married couple and their fight for survival against political corruption. *Biutiful*, as we have seen, employs an Argentinean, Spanish and Mexican crew, while being filmed in Barcelona, and directed by a Mexican filmmaker. In a similar vein, *El espinazo del diablo* is located in rural Spain, and the characters are played by an Argentinean, and several Spanish actors, while being directed by the Mexican Guillermo del Toro. It seems that transnationalism is and has been a dominant practice for a considerable time in filmmaking, and *En la mente* is an addition to this body of work that shifts terrain, directorship and language during its narrative. The transnational framing of *En la mente* contributes toward the film's aesthetic and international appeal in that each location is filmed using a different color palette (the scenes in Hungary, for example, are shot in black and white, while the present film scenes are shot in color), filmic textures and format (past scenes at the missionary are shot in Super 8), and inter-generic interludes (interviews regularly enter the narrative with commentaries from the "real" characters who are then interpreted in the fictional film starring Giménez Cacho) alongside documentary sections running alongside the fictional pieces. At the time of its release, *En la mente* won six Arieles, including Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor (Daniel Giménez Cacho) and Best Actress (Carmen Beato).

En la mente del asesino is divided into three main sections which are entwined and correlate to provide an interpretation of the main character, Aro Tolbukhin, piecing together information drawn from testimonies, eyewitness accounts and interviews with the killer himself alongside fictional re-creations. These constructions work on the principle that each filmic piece provides a contribution toward a larger-scale project which aims to delve into the mind of a killer. What is more, the ambiguity surrounding Tolbukhin's real identity underpins the narrative questionings in the film and seeks to expose the reasons for the crimes committed. Thus, *En la mente* sets out to dissect the possible motives for the killings by representing a protagonist who swings between fiction and reality, both in terms of the construction of his (filmic) persona and in terms of the content of his stories in the film. The methodology weaves together a multi-generic filmic tapestry which contains fictional scenes combined with documentary footage capturing the "real" Aro Tolbukhin, inter-temporal interviews² which are linked through the use of memory and shared subject matter, and a haunting short film, *El vestido deshabitado* (*The uninhabited dress*), that takes as its narrative basis the deconstruction of Tolbukhin's childhood experiences and is shot in black-and-white format. Despite the film's seemingly fragmentary structure, an account is composed which pieces together the image of a man who is tormented by his past, grief-stricken over the loss of his twin sister Selma and ultimately driven to cruelty and an apparent insanity in later life.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

From the opening sequences, spectators are drawn to the self-reflective and self-conscious process of filmmaking in *En la mente*. The scenes open one of *En la mente's* directors, the Catalan filmmaker Lydia Zimmerman (the great niece of Lise August, a documentary filmmaker whose footage forms part of *En la mente's* narrative) arriving at the TSR Studios in Paris. She is accompanied by Yves Keetman, a producer with whom August had worked while filming about the penal system in Central America and who is explaining some of the background information on their shoot in Guatemala back in the 1980s. Zimmerman is guided by Keetman down the TSR corridors, and into the basement archives, where the reels that document Aro Tolbukhin's final days on death row are being held. Subsequently, through Keetman's examination of the reels, spectators are transported to another format (16 mm color film) and time, whereby the

first glimpses of the “real” Aro Tolbukhin are caught in a segment of August and Keetman’s documentary footage from the 1980s. At this point in the narrative, while an imprisoned Tolbukhin is in focus, Zimmerman’s voice-over commentary offers an explanation for the idea behind *En la mente*, a project that aimed to fill the void left by August and Keetman’s unfinished work. As Zimmerman recalls, it is August’s footage and the camera’s fascination with Tolbukhin that incites the three directors of *En la mente* to delve further into this character and re-create (his) story (Reforma 2002). Their hermeneutic approach favors a wide-ranging interpretation and representation of the same subject, through using a multi-generic format. As film critic Servín Magaña notes:

El film se introduce en un “arriesgado ejercicio cinematográfico,” que no solo mezcla la ficción con el documental, sino que además emplea diversos formatos que permiten la narración de la historia, de manera que lo mismo se puede ver una imagen en blanco y negro que una escena muda con subtítulos. (Servín Magaña 2002, 63)

The film ventures on a “risky cinematic exercise” that not only merges fiction with documentary, but also employs different formats that allow for the narration of the story in such a way that it is possible to view an image in black-and-white followed by a silent scene with subtitles.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in *En la mente* we have interviews juxtaposed with fictional pieces, combined with documentary excerpts and coverage from television and newspaper reports. In addition to the three main sections of the film, there is a further segment which acts as a subtext to the main narrative as a whole, seen in the form of August and Keetman’s documentary. All parts of the film, although different in form and content, enter one another’s visual space in order to reaffirm the uniform yet plural interpretation of Tolbukhin. Therefore, Zimmerman’s contribution to *En la mente* continues the work of August through her interviews with those who knew Tolbukhin. In this case, Zimmerman’s interviews, conducted in the 1990s using 35 mm black-and-white film run parallel with August’s footage shot during the 1980s in 16 mm color format. Also in the film, Villaronga’s creation forms the crux of the fictional dimension to the narrative and his direction of the actors, Daniel Giménez Cacho and Carmen Beato, who play Tolbukhin and Sister Carmen, respectively, aims to interpret within a fictional framework the intense relationship between these two characters, which took place during the

protagonist's time at the Mission in Guatemala. Finally, in the last section of *En la mente*, Racine's contribution takes the spectator on a nostalgic journey back in time to Aro's childhood, seen in *El vestido deshabitado*. Together, the interviews, fictional pieces and documentary footage present the spectator with an overall vision of Aro Tolbukhin as both an imaginary creation and a "real" historical character. However, the film's structure avoids falling into fragmentary inconsistencies through the careful handling of fiction with reality and the constant paralleling of insights into the character of Tolbukhin, achieved through the re-created scenes and the personal testimonies given. These factors give the film its metacinematic quality in both its self-reflexive and self-questioning positioning throughout. The audience is kept guessing as to what is real, what is imagined and what is film. In addition, all narrative sections within the film are held together by the same quest theme that aims to uncover the "real" Aro Tolbukhin through the medium of the reel, the use of collective and individual memory, fantasy and commentary. As Cerlin observes, "[a] partir de este material, la película intenta profundizar en el personaje y en las causas de su comportamiento" (this material forms a filmic basis from which to explore the causes of the character's behavior (Cerlin 2002, 8).

In relation to the film's narrative structure and content, the employment of multiple textures and formats constituted at the time of its release something of an innovation. In the words of Tomás Pérez Turrent (2002),

[*En la mente* es] una cinta completamente distinta, que juega el juego del falso documental y la falsa ficción; algo que se ha hecho mucho en el cine de los últimos años y rara vez se ha intentado en México. (5)

([*In the Mind of a Killer* is] a completely different film that plays the game of false documentary and false fiction—something that has been carried out a great deal in recent cinema, but rarely attempted in Mexico.)

It is precisely this synergy of formats and styles that characterizes *En la mente* whereby not only is there a generic cross-over, but an overlap of roles which sees the intervention of the creators within the film itself. The filmmakers at times take on the role of interviewers, as we see with August, and on other occasions step in to provide commentary, as witnessed in the case of Zimmerman, who also acts as interviewer. Therefore, the synthesizing of fiction and reality serve to fuel the speculation surrounding who Aro Tolbukhin really was by raising doubts on his own identity, as will be explored later in this chapter. As we shall see, the deliberate mixing of

genres serves to articulate the blurring of fiction and reality both in terms of Tolbukhin's case and in relation to the role of memory in the process of narration.

MEMORY AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

In *En la mente*, the multilayered whisperings and commentaries guide the spectator into a world that is both tormented and multilayered, deliberately framing the narration with elements of fantasy and desire. This technique is noticeable during the interview episodes conducted by Zimmerman, which in turn give way to the fictional re-creations directed by Villaronga. The directors' interplay between fiction and reality aims to raise questions regarding notions of "truth" and "authenticity" within the discourse of documentary, and sets out to blur the generic boundaries of documentary and fiction filmmaking. (Racine et al. 2002a, 38).

Interestingly, Zimmerman is told during a conversation with Keetman that August's audio recording of an interview with an imprisoned Tolbukhin was deliberately withheld from the final version of their documentary, because of the apparently false nature of Tolbukhin's account.³ Therefore, it appears that the contents of a compelling and intimate interview provided by the real Tolbukhin were classified as "fabricated" by his interviewer, and were subsequently removed from the final cut. Much later on, Villaronga and his co-directors realized the importance of this interview as a means for exposing Tolbukhin's inner conflicts, and seized on its contents in order to portray their own interpretations of a reality set within a fictional context. Fully aware of the tensions between truth and fiction within this narrative, and of the possible non-truths contained within Tolbukhin's testimony, both Villaronga and Racine set about creating a space in which to represent these suppressed stories. The result is the recycling of Tolbukhin's memories, presented in the form of a fictionalized re-creation played by Giménez Cacho. At this point in the narrative, Giménez Cacho arrives at the scene of the interview in a wheelchair. His attitude is calm, and his own description of his childhood is detached and unemotional. Within this scene, as the fictional Tolbukhin begins to recall his childhood experiences, spectators are offered a glimpse into the killer's tormented mind through the fictional re-creation that follows, named *El vestido deshabitado*, more of which is discussed below.

It appears that the "fantasy" element to the abovementioned interview, therefore, granted Racine and Villaronga free reigns with which to

interpret the roots of Tolbukhin's apparent insanity in a filmic way, and thus visually represent his childhood and the possible drives that led to his future crimes. The creative license awarded through the categorization of fiction within a "real" context, or in other words, the (possible) fictional account of his life given by Tolbukhin to August in an audio-recorded interview, provides the directors of *En la mente* with a blank canvas onto which depict an interpretation of the subject's character and inner world. Significantly, this desire to map out and explore the character's internal spaces forms one of the fundamental aims of the film as a whole and reveals the existence of what they termed as an "inner garden."⁴

In addition, the act of structuring the narrative of Tolbukhin's interview within a fictional framework further legitimizes its contents since the process frees up the possibilities of representation, as spectators never fully hear the interview in its entirety, and the re-creation is presented as deliberately self-conscious. There are, however, indications that this fiction could possibly be "true" through the juxtaposition of Giménez Cacho's prison scene (and thus the contents of *El vestido deshabitado*) with the testimony given by Tolbukhin's nanny, a "real" character interviewed by Zimmerman. Through an interpreter, the now-elderly Slamár Yulané recalls her experiences in the Tolbukhin household, where she had worked as a nanny for several decades, and had acted as a surrogate mother figure to the young children under her care. Yulané first came into contact with the very young Aro Tolbukhin after she arrived to tend to him and his twin sister Selma, following the untimely death of their mother. She remained in the Tolbukhin household as the twins grew, calming their childhood anxieties, and gradually, with time, witnessing the children's increasingly insular relationship. The interview with the nanny, combined with the fictional re-creation of the abovementioned withdrawn interview with Tolbukhin, then unfolds into what becomes the narrative of *El vestido deshabitado*, the black-and-white re-creation of Tolbukhin's childhood which forms the final part of *En la mente*. Furthermore, Yulané's memories provide the spectator with testimonial evidence of Tolbukhin's early experiences, and serve to offer an insight into his formative years. This technique also proves critical when attempting to examine the killer's past motives for his crimes. In *El vestido deshabitado*, the main characters are played by actors, and consist of Aro and Selma, the children's father, and the nanny (Fig. 7.1).

The story is seen through the eyes of a young Aro, since part of the narrative is based on Tolbukhin's testimonies given during his interview



Fig. 7.1 A young Aro Tolbukhin (Aram González). Still from *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (2002)

with August. There are episodes, however, that allude to Yulané's testimonial input, and in particular the scene involving the siblings' incestuous encounter, which in the film is represented as being witnessed from afar by the nanny herself.

EL VESTIDO DESHABITADO

The title of the short film *El vestido deshabitado* is symbolic of the absent maternal figure in the narrative, and refers to the dress belonging to the children's mother, which lies unworn on the empty bed. In this context, the mother figure constitutes an enigma, and at first it is suggested that she is confined to her bedroom due to her ailing condition. Furthermore, the children hold onto this belief in the hope that one day their mother will emerge from her quarters. The children witness their father's daily visits to their mother's room, seemingly at first to take food and to offer companionship. However, it is later discovered (by the children themselves) that in fact these visits provide the father with an opportunity to grieve his loss in private. During these scenes, spectators observe how a simple white dress lies on the bed, in place of Aro and Selma's mother, and serves as a focal point for the twins' realization of her physical absence. The image of their grief-stricken father, weeping over the white dress, constitutes a turning point for Aro and Selma, as they struggle to cope with, and comprehend, the concept of death. This emotional journey

further unites the siblings, whose love for one another will lead them toward an incestuous relationship in their early teenage years (Fig. 7.2).

The result of their liaison is an unborn child, which will perish due to an accidental fire that also claims Selma's life. These tragedies will mark Aro for the rest of his life, and in the film are portrayed as the defining traumas that will dictate the protagonist's actions as an adult, a conclusion that is crucial to the psychoanalytical examinations taking place, as will be observed later in this chapter (Reforma 2002). In addition to attempting to delve into the psychological impetus that may have led to Tolbukhin's instability, *El vestido deshabitado* exemplifies the directors' methodological choice of endeavoring to find what they see as the killer's "inner garden," and hence humanize the subject, while steering clear of trying to provide definitive answers to his actions. As Villaronga points out:

Este film es un intento de exponer y tratar de entender la psicología de este hombre, aunque sin querer hacer una película psicológica. No queremos juzgar, sólo intentamos entender a este personaje. (Servín Magaña 2002, 63)



Fig. 7.2 Selma (Eva Fortea) and her brother Aro share a scene from *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino*

This film is an attempt to explore and expose this man's psychology, without however, aiming to make a psychological film. We try not to make judgements, our sole aim was to try and understand this character.

Moreover, Racine, supports Villaronga's view when he states that the *El vestido deshabitado* "es un viaje atrás en el tiempo, no para justificar, per sí para entender ([the film] is a journey back in time, not with the aim of justifying but rather understanding [the killer's actions])" (Reforma 2002).

This narrative drive, intent on unraveling the root causes of the protagonist's criminal actions, does, however, take on a psychoanalytical character by its very endeavor. As mentioned above, the fact that the directors allude to the notion that childhood experiences may provide answers to adult conduct, points toward a practice within psychoanalysis that is known as psychodynamics, and the same provides a useful framework from which to read the film's narrative methodology. The use of a well-known psychoanalytical practice as a tool for deconstructing the subject's mental condition proves creatively fruitful for the filmmakers, and allows the seemingly different narrative formats and textures to work fluidly together. Crucial to our understanding of the imperatives behind the organization of the narrative in *En la mente del asesino* lies the acknowledgment that psychodynamics purports to recognize that repressed childhood experiences act as motivational forces for adult behavior.

PSYCHODYNAMICS

In order to observe *En la mente*'s narrative framework, my analysis here will momentarily address the meaning of the term "psychodynamics," and will provide a brief overview of its practice and significance to a reading of the film. Freud's theory of psychodynamics was initially referred to in his essay "The Ego and the Id," which built on the pioneering work of German scientists, Ernst von Brucke and Hermann von Helmholtz (Freud 1923). In basic terms, Freud's prototype relied upon the principles of the first law of thermodynamics, the central premise of which concludes that the total amount of matter and energy in a given system undergoing any transformation or process is conserved but not destroyed (Jarvis 2004, 2). When this law of physics is theoretically relocated to a psychological context, the psychodynamic hypothesis determines that experiences, and, more specifically, early childhood experiences, are stored in the unconscious:

The psychodynamic approach to psychology emphasizes the importance of emotion, the continuity between childhood experiences and the adult personality, the particular importance of early relationships and the psychological significance of subjective experience and unconscious mental processes. (Jarvis 2004, 8)

What is crucial here, and adds to our understanding of the imperatives behind the inclusion of *El vestido deshabitado* in the overall cinematic piece, is the psychodynamic recognition of childhood experiences shaping adult character traits and behavior, which is fundamental to a reading of *En la mente* and its main protagonist. The story told within *El vestido deshabitado* further strengthens this idea.

In his study of the unconscious, Freud recognized a similarity in the way the mind dealt with distressing experiences, and determined that if these were to become suppressed, the same process would result in the eventual resurfacing of such traumas to the conscious level. Furthermore, unconscious drives impel conscious actions and form the crux of instinctive behavior:

the nature of the unconscious mind varies considerably in alternative theories but all psychodynamic approaches share the assumption that we are influenced in some way by mental processes of which we are not normally aware. The Freudian version of the unconscious mind is dominated by instincts and repressed memories that constantly influence cognition and behaviour. (Jarvis 2004, 3)

In a pathological setting, one of the possible effects of repressed childhood traumas is seen in the development of the conditions of psychosis and neurosis in adult life, a notion that is explored in the film when we view Tolbukhin unable to cope with the death of a child while living at the Mission in Guatemala. This child's death triggers Tolbukhin's repressed grief for his sister and sends him spiraling out of control. Moreover, the root cause of Tolbukhin's psychotic behavior in adult life, it is suggested in the film, lies in his childhood experiences, and in particular in those relating to the deaths of his mother and sister, compounded by the presence of an emotionally unavailable father.

Jarvis outlines Freud's term "*das Unbewusste*" (unconscious) as varying depending on the contexts in which it is set (Jarvis 2004, 23). Borrowing from Erdelyi's insights into the characterizations of the unconscious, Jarvis

provides three main ramifications to the term. These include what is conceived of as the “descriptive unconscious” and incorporates “any memories or mental processes that are not subject to conscious awareness” (Jarvis 2004, 23). Secondly, the “dynamic unconscious” provides reference to “material that is inaccessible to the unconscious mind either because it has been repressed from consciousness or because it is inherently inaccessible to consciousness” (Jarvis 2004, 23). Jarvis goes on to stress that the “dynamic unconscious” does, however, “interact with and constantly impact upon the conscious mind” (Jarvis 2004, 23). Thirdly, the “systemic unconscious” constitutes the basis of Freud’s notion of “what later became known as the *it* or *id*, the deepest layer of the unconscious mind, instinctive and illogical” (Jarvis 2004, 23). A psychodynamic reading of Tolbukhin’s depiction in the film demonstrates the directors’ interrogation of the childhood factors that, due to the influential events of Tolbukhin’s past, set in motion the future killer’s irrational behavior as an adult. The realization of his mother’s death, and the subsequent sense of abandonment felt by both himself and his sister, alongside the feelings of solitude and eventual heartache caused by the loss of Selma, all provide emotions that are painful and conflicting, and which remain unresolved and are stored in Tolbukhin’s unconscious. These later resurface when Tolbukhin’s life is struck by yet another tragic event. These same unresolved emotions are thus contained within the protagonist’s “descriptive unconscious” and do not find expression until later on in the narrative. As will shall see below, when Tolbukhin is placed at the Mission in Guatemala, the contents of both his “dynamic” and “systemic” unconscious begin to reveal themselves, at first governing his desires for Sister Carmen, then later dictating his acts of cruelty upon his victims. Furthermore, in *En la mente* we also see how Tolbukhin’s mental stability deteriorates during the course of his time at the Mission. Psychodynamic in nature, the film’s methodology points to the possible source of Tolbukhin’s psychosis as being located within his childhood experiences, and exhibits these findings in the film *El vestido deshabitado*. The following section of this chapter will observe how the principles of psychodynamics are employed in *En la mente*, which can be observed in terms of the film’s narrative device.

PSYCHODYNAMICS ON THE SCREEN

As I observed earlier in my discussions, it is suggested in *En la mente* that the defining trigger that sets in motion the process of Tolbukhin's mental deterioration is his first encounter with Sister Carmen, which occurs at the Mission in Guatemala toward the beginning of the fictional re-creation. During this section of the film, spectators observe a very ill Tolbukhin being rescued by members of the Mission, who find him wandering alone in the jungle. He is subsequently nursed back to health by Sister Carmen, and when he finally awakens from a fever, Tolbukhin's first word to Sister Carmen is the name "Selma." Because of the state of delirium in which Tolbukhin finds himself, his utterance "Selma" points toward the drives at play which are contained within his descriptive unconscious, and alludes to the attachment he maintains to the memory of his sibling. Later on the film, the notion that Sister Carmen reminds Tolbukhin of his own twin is confirmed through their activities together, and it is this unconscious connection which will fuel the protagonist's desire for the nun. Furthermore, both the fictionally re-created characters of Selma and Sister Carmen are linked cinematically through the use of a musical motif that accompanies the visual image of each character when in the frame. These non-diegetic musical links serve to engage the spectator with the psychological connections taking place within Tolbukhin's unconscious. Thus, the feelings that are aroused in the adult Tolbukhin through his encounter with Sister Carmen act as reminders of his past passion for his twin sister.

As his health improves, and their relationship intensifies, Sister Carmen and Tolbukhin (or Hans Witz, the name under which Tolbukhin is known at the Mission) become closer. Eventually, with the arrival of an orphaned baby, Sister Carmen and Witz/Tolbukhin form a pseudo (imaginary) family. The birth of baby Kutí, and then his informal "adoption" by Sister Carmen and Tolbukhin, provide the protagonist with the fulfillment of his repressed fatherly desires (kept within his dynamic unconscious), and allows the protagonist to act out the fantasy that was denied him through the abrupt death of his sister and their unborn child. It is also significant that the orphaned child is given the name "Kutí," which, as Carmen explains in an interview, means "he who was saved from the fire." The baby's name indicates the symbolic role this child plays in Tolbukhin's imaginary, since the element of fire becomes a signifying device linking the protagonist's present actions with his past traumas, once more pointing toward the filmmakers' psychodynamic hypothesis at work.

As spectators we view images shot in Super 8 format of the real Sister Carmen and Tolbukhin/Witz, walking together with a baby in Sister Carmen's arms. Carmen and Zimmerman are then heard in conversation, linking back to an interview being conducted by Zimmerman with Carmen in the 1990s. This commentary between the two women affords a platform from which to observe the relationship between Tolbukhin/Witz and Carmen, and provides spectators with the former nun's insights into the significance of Kuti's presence for both Sister Carmen and Aro Tolbukhin. Moreover, Carmen's observations offer the spectator a glimpse into her view of the past events, and fills in the voids by offering testimonial material that is then fictionally re-created and directed by Villaronga. Our gaze at this stage in the film is drawn to the image of a younger, smiling Sister Carmen and Tolbukhin/Witz, standing side by side outside the infirmary at the Mission. In the fictional re-creation directed by Villaronga however, Kuti presents Sister Carmen with a context in which to realize the latter's own, until then, repressed maternal instincts, which are contained within her systemic unconscious. Spectators view examples of this notion in the fictional scene where Sister Carmen is shown to be simulating the act of nursing Kuti, while contemplating her framed reflection in the mirror positioned opposite her. Eventually Sister Carmen's suppressed (maternal and sexual) desires will form the catalyst for her abandonment of the habit. The "real" Carmen herself supports this view, when, during her interview with Zimmerman, she acknowledges that she and Hans Witz had formed a "little family," much to the growing disapproval of the other members of the community. Rumors of a liaison between Tolbukhin/Witz and Sister Carmen circulated among community members at the time, as several interviewees confirm. Carmen is also aware of how her relationship with Tolbukhin/Witz might have appeared to others, and recognizes the possible temptations to which she may have fallen prey. An abrupt ending to the idyllic "family unit" comes about with the tragic death of the infant, an event that spells out the beginning of the end for the repressed desires between Tolbukhin/Witz and Sister Carmen, and sets in motion the rapid demise of the main protagonist's mental state. This is shown after Tolbukhin/Witz's frustrated sexual attack on Sister Carmen, which plunges the former into a deep depression that eventually leads him into a state of psychosis. The same event forces Sister Carmen to leave the Mission on a transfer elsewhere, and Tolbukhin/Witz's downfall concludes with his first act of killing. A psychodynamic reading would suggest that it is at this point in the narrative that the subject's repressed

emotions find their way to the conscious level, leading to his mental breakdown. As Tolbukhin struggles to cope with the events in his life, his mental stability deteriorates, pushing him further toward a psychotic episode (Fig. 7.3).

At this stage in the narrative, Tolbukhin's previously repressed desires begin to unfold, surfacing onto his conscious level and governing his actions, recalling Freud's insights into the reemergence of suppressed emotions in the form of behavioral drives. From this point onward in the



Fig. 7.3 A traumatized Aro in adulthood (Daniel Giménez Cacho) in a scene from *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino*

narrative, Tolbukhin becomes obsessed with pregnant women, which provides an indication of the systemic unconscious imperatives that have begun to dictate his behavior. It is from this moment onward, the film suggests, that Tolbukhin sets out on his murder spree, culminating with his killing of the infirmiry patients. What is more, it is not coincidental that Tolbukhin's chosen victims are expectant women, since they unconsciously refer him back to Selma's condition when she died. Thus, Tolbukhin repeats the cause of Selma's death, and reenacts the trauma by subjecting his victims to a similar demise by incineration.

It seems therefore, that the film's psychodynamic methodology, which relies upon the use of memory, the revisiting of past events and the examination of childhood trauma (conducted cinematically), all provide the directors with an opportunity for visually exploring the psychodynamic hypothesis on the screen.

THE REEL/REAL ARO TOLBUKHIN

As observed above, the narrative of *En la mente*, therefore, constitutes an exploration of the killer's mind using a cinematic framework organized around the principles of psychodynamic analysis. As a starting point for this exploration, the directors take August's reels as evidence of a distorted mind. Crucial to this task are the scenes that demonstrate an imprisoned Tolbukhin, directly addressing the interviewer and responding, albeit vaguely, to the questions posed to him. One of these questions concerns his motives for the killing of innocent people. Tolbukhin's response is nonchalant, and devalues the lives of those he killed: "¿Por qué iba a seguir cuidándolos, por qué?" (Why should I have continued to care for them, what for?). When asked about the doubts shed on the validity of his claims that he committed all of the murders, Tolbukhin becomes agitated: "¿Qué quiere decir, que soy loco? No soy loco" (What are you trying to say—that I am a madman? I'm not a madman). The "real" Tolbukhin's denouncement of his own insanity, his lawyer's affirmation of the inconsistencies within the defendant's statements and subsequent evidence that was refused entry to the courts by Tolbukhin himself are inserted into *En la mente* both as a means for questioning both Tolbukhin's full culpability for his admitted crimes (which extend beyond those committed on the infirmiry victims) and as a way of exposing the tensions between fiction and reality. This idea is further explored when Tolbukhin's lawyer,

Licenciado Alberto Márquez, reveals to Zimmerman that there were doubts concerning his client's real identity. As spectators are aware from the interviewees captured by August's camera, Tolbukhin was known among the Mission community as Hans Witz, yet his signed confession records his name as Aro Tolbukhin. When investigating the registration of a named Aro Tolbukhin at the Mexican consulate, Márquez reveals there to have been discrepancies in the data. In an interview conducted with Zimmerman, Márquez highlights that there appeared to have been a significant lack of correspondence between the date of birth, parental names and other personal information provided by Tolbukhin/Witz, with those recorded at the consulate for a person under the name of Aro Tolbukhin. A question mark over who Tolbukhin/Witz really was, and indeed if the person caught on camera really was who he claimed to be, further exposes what appears to take the form of significant inconsistencies and the possible fantasies that frame the case of Tolbukhin. Had Witz taken on another identity upon his arrest, and thereby increased the number of crimes committed due to his own self-destructive desires? And if so, who was the real Aro Tolbukhin? What could have been the motives behind such self-condemnation and ultimate death? These are some of the questionings that lead the directors of *En la mente* to piece together fractions of a fragmented life story, a possibly invented identity and the defining factors behind what constitutes an ongoing mystery, within a work that incorporates footage of the "real," alongside fictional depictions of the man perhaps erroneously known as Aro Tolbukhin.

NOTES

1. Sources of funding for *En la mente* include companies Altavista Films, Canal+ España, Lestes Films, Obrerón Cinematográfica, Programa Ibermedia, Tevisió Catalunya (TV3) and Televisión Española (TVE).
2. These interviews have been conducted over different stages, and with different interviewees and interviewers. Those conducted during the 1980s were overseen by Lise August, and the interviews recorded during the 1990s were conducted by Lydia Zimmerman. Both sets of interviews work in correlation with one another, each feeding the other with fragments of information which work toward providing an insight into the character of Aro Tolbukhin.

3. In the film, Keetman tells Zimmerman that the contents of the interview with Tolbukhin appeared to be “demasiado fantasioso” (“too fictitious”).
4. In an interview, Villaronga states: “Recuerdo que al principio cuando escribíamos el guión, hablamos con la abogada criminalista para sacar datos. Y nos contó que en todos los homicidas y asesinos con los que había tratado había descubierto en ellos un jardín interior. Aro Tolbukhin, película lo que quiere es mostrarnos ese jardín interior.” See *Reforma* (2002, 35).

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CHAPTER 8

Loss and Mourning in Documentary: Tatiana Huezo's *Ausencias* (2015)

Before making this docu, my first premise was to discover what violence-generated fear can do to people. It's a fear that paralyzes; a kind of sickness of the soul that impedes you from getting on with life, from evolving. (De la Fuente 2015)
—Tatiana Huezo, filmmaker

INTRODUCTION

We have seen thus far in this book how the issue of violence, and in particular the recent drugs war in Mexico, has been a recurring theme in the films analyzed in this study. Chapter 4 observed one of the earlier films to deal with the problem, seen in Luis Estrada's *El infierno* (2010), and in Chap. 5, I explored the relationship between representation and violence, where the image of the victim in Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013) formed the center point of my discussions. Now, in this chapter, I return to this emblematic figure of the victim; only this time the sense of suffering is one that is endured by those left behind after the violent act has occurred. In this chapter, my analysis will turn to focus on the drug war's victims, namely the families of the many disappeared, whose lives have changed irreparably following the kidnapping of their loved ones. Using as an example Tatiana Huezo's exploration of the sense of loss and prolonged mourning found in this context, my analysis will examine this condition, as relayed in her short film *Ausencias* (2015) (Fig. 8.1).



Fig. 8.1 Film poster for Tatiana Huezo's *Ausencias* (2015)

Huezo's film is a story that follows the emotional journey of Lourdes Herrera de Llano (who also refers to herself as Lulú in the film), a mother from Saltillo, Coahuila, who has lost her son Brandon, and husband Esteban Acosta Rodríguez. Esteban, his two brothers, named Walberto and Gerardo, and son Brandon were kidnapped from their car one morning as they made their way to Monterrey airport. The case was covered

widely by both local and national media, which saw the crime as evidence that cartel violence now also included the kidnappings and disappearance of children, exemplified in the abduction of Brandon. As Marcela Turati (2012) writes in *Proceso* magazine:

Atrás quedaron los días en que la delincuencia respetaba a las familias, sobre todo a los niños, quienes ahora en el fragor de la guerra calderonista contra el narcotráfico y las pugnas por el control de las plazas son la parte más vulnerable de la población. Y ello no sólo por el riesgo de quedar atrapados en el fuego cruzado o de recibir una bala perdida, sino porque ahora se les secuestra y desaparece como a los adultos. (Turati 2012)

Gone are the days when crime used to respect families, and especially children, who now, in the heat of the Calderonist war against drug trafficking and the struggles to control the *plazas*, remain the most vulnerable part of the population. And this not only because of the risk of getting caught in the crossfire or receiving a stray bullet, but because they [children] are now kidnapped and made to disappear like adults.

Previous reports had included the finding of abandoned children in public spaces, after their parents and relatives had been taken during a kidnapping (Riveles 2011). At the time of his abduction, Esteban, Brandon's father, was chief of security of the local penitentiary known as Cereso Varonil in Saltillo, and although the documentary makes no reference to his profession, nor explores possible motives, the context of his disappearance seems to indicate that he was targeted specifically. As the local newspaper *Zócalo* reports, on the day of the abduction several SUVs were lying in wait on the Saltillo-Monterrey highway and swiftly closed Esteban's path as he approached en route to the airport (Redacción 2009). Witnesses describe how the vehicles configured around the family's sand-colored Malibu, blocking their access, and the evidence of blood and empty bullet cartridges found later at the scene of the crime indicates a possible confrontation which may have concluded in Esteban becoming injured (Redacción 2009). In the documentary, Lourdes explains how when she went to report Esteban as missing to the authorities, she was confronted with the image of one of her husband's shoes which had been found at the scene, and contained several spots of blood on its surface. Although the press reported that Esteban was chief of security at the local penitentiary, Huezo does not mention this fact in the documentary, perhaps as a way to avoid speculation. Cereso Varonil prison has been in the press over the last few years, with stories running concerned with overcrowding, corruption

and the increase of cartel dominance within the penitentiary walls (Gudiño 2016). In February 2016, it was announced that a new building at the penitentiary was being constructed in an attempt to tackle the problem of overcrowding.

In addition to the above, and relevant to the context of the crime committed against Lourdes' husband and son, the state governor at the time of the family members' disappearances, has since been accused of corruption and alliances with the Zetas, and on January 15, 2016, he was arrested while in Madrid, for allegedly money laundering and misappropriating public funds. The accused, Humberto Moreira, ex-governor of the State of Coahuila, has since been released on bail; he then returned to Mexico and, at the time of writing, is awaiting trial pending further investigation. At the time of his arrest in 2016, Moreira was national president of the PRI, the then ruling party, where he continued to deny all allegations. Several media outlets, however, have reported that the Spanish government's anti-corruption prosecutor had been investigating the connection between the allegations of Moreira's money laundering operation and the Zetas drug cartel (Guindal 2016). It has also been alleged that the assassination of Moreira's son José Eduardo, carried out in 2012, occurred in retaliation for a money laundering operation involving the Zetas whereby the cartel felt aggrieved at the results of the deal and sought revenge for not receiving their financial dues (Redacción AN 2016).

The context for the crime of abduction, executed against Esteban and his family, therefore, appears to indicate a much more expansive sociopolitical problem of corruption that fuels criminality and abuses of power. Although the above has yet to be proven, basic investigative scrutiny and media reports point toward the involvement of organized crime in the abduction of Esteban, his two brothers and son Brandon. An official linking of these factors (Esteban's profession, the political corruption flagrant at the time of his kidnapping and the dominance of the Zetas in the states of Coahuila) has yet to be made. However, with the case files for the Acosta family's abduction remaining open, the crime committed against them continues to be brought to the fore, partly due to Lourdes' activism and participation in local and national protest movements. Regularly present at events organized by the *Fundación por los desaparecidos de Coahuila* (Foundation for the disappeared of Coahuila), (FUNDEC), and speaking at rallies such as the one held in 2013 at Saltillo Cathedral, Lourdes' political presence and vocal protestations have ensured that the Acosta abduction, along with many others, remains unforgotten (Lakhani 2013).

Furthermore, Lourdes supported the *Caravana* (rally) that was led by the mothers and fathers of disappeared victims, which traveled down to Mexico City and was aimed at highlighting their plight and uniting with other similar protest groups from across the Republic. In addition, Lourdes was one of the few members of the group to meet with Mexican poet and movement founder Javier Sicilia when he traveled up with his *Caravana Por la Paz y Dignidad* (rally for peace and dignity) following the kidnapping and assassination of his son. Despite this political visibility and efforts made to highlight her struggle, it is Lourdes' personal tragedy that Huezo chooses to focus her documentary on. How does one cope after the enforced removal of a family member or one's child? How to focus the emotions, sense of absence and loss? And how do these factors manifest themselves in the day-to-day of life, after the event? These are some of the questions that Huezo attempts to explore with her film, by focusing on Lourdes' story. Despite the personal focus, however, Lourdes' ordeal in the film is symbolic of a much wider national state of trauma that is characterized by a sense of loss, disempowerment and the politicization of grief as a responsive action. Lourdes' activism following the disappearance of her son and husband, alongside her private grief and profound moments of despair, provide the spectator with an insight into one of the many lives and personal stories that have been affected by cartel violence, which include kidnappings and enforced disappearances. Furthermore, these crimes of abductions have been on the rise in Mexico, reaching unprecedented levels during the drugs crisis.

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN MEXICO

So far this study has examined the elements of violence and discord as manifested in the fiction films, and in the case of Chap. 7, the documentary texts that have been produced in Mexico over fifteen years. This chapter will continue to explore this trait examining violence and conflict on the screen, only the focus will now be on the documentary mode. To reiterate a point I have made throughout this book, my examinations are by no means exhaustive. The task of extensively scrutinizing nearly two decades of recent documentary filmmaking in Mexico, therefore, lies beyond the parameters of this study due to the breadth and scope of production in recent years. Misha MacLaird's (2013) excellent analysis of Mexican documentary filmmaking, and the socioeconomic imperatives at the heart of its production and recent commercial success is worthy of

consultation for further reading on the phenomenon. Furthermore, it is important to note that documentary filmmaking in Mexico has witnessed something of a revival, with many productions venturing on to receive prizes at international film festivals, attracting mainstream exposure and consumption at commercial screening venues as we see for example, in the work of Juan Carlos Rulfo. In addition, Mexico's recognition of the significance of documentary filmmaking as an asset for the industry, and the considerable wealth in quality and subject matter sampled on the screen, have set in motion the establishment of designated documentary film festivals such as DOCSDF (Mexico City Documentary Film Festival), which launched in 2005, and is held annually in the nation's capital. Worthy of mentioning also is the growing success of the traveling film festival known as *Ambulante Gira de Documentales*, which is one of the projects under the patronage of production company Canana, originally founded by two of Mexico's most well-known actors and business partners, Gabriel García Bernal and Diego Luna. According to MacLaird:

Ambulante Gira de Documentales, [is] a festival of documentary films that circulates throughout the country, promoting social and educational concerns. The festival's itinerate nature follows Canana's mission to promote stories that reflect Mexico's geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity. (2013, 85)

Over the years, *Ambulante* has grown in strength as an important festival, gaining critical recognition from the industry and doubling the number of productions scheduled during its screenings. What is also important to note are the festivals of Guadalajara, a well-established film event, and the slightly younger Morelia Film Festival, which have become two of most significant events in the industry. Morelia Film Festival, as Paul Julian Smith (2014) notes, has remained faithful to its early remit of providing a platform for shorts and documentaries to be exposed, showcasing the nation's most promising new talent. As a sign of its success, the event has expanded to include Mexican feature films, in addition to foreign premiers, and has attracted the support and attendance of mainstream film celebrities such as Tim Roth, Quentin Tarantino and Guillermo del Toro, among others (Smith 2014; 30).

It is the aim of this chapter, therefore, to explore an example of this revival in documentary practice mentioned above, and my analysis will examine a documentary that exposes the effects of the nation's growing

sense of social instability. As mentioned above, the selected documentary in this book articulates a concern with the nature of violent discourse dominating the media, public streets and private spaces in Mexico. And it is these private spaces of mourning, and loss, as examples of affected experience after an enforced disappearance has occurred, that constitutes the focus of this chapter's analysis. According to the Mexican periodical *El mundo*, between the years of 2006 and 2010 (which coincides with the period in which Esteban along with his son and brothers disappeared) 18,491 cases of kidnappings and enforced disappearances were reported to the authorities (Veiga 2011). At the time of writing, the number of disappeared victims in Mexico, according to the Amnesty International Annual Report for 2015–2016, stood at 27,000, and more recent figures suggest disappearance of closer to 40,000, with commentators pointing toward a much higher number of cases that remain unreported for fear of repercussions from organized crime, as Riveles (2011) notes:

las víctimas de desaparición forzada no confían en el sistema de justicia, ni en los ministerios públicos, ni en la policía y ni en las fuerzas armadas; la impunidad es un patrón crónico y presente en los casos de desapariciones forzadas, y no se han realizado los esfuerzos suficientes para determinar la suerte o paradero de las personas desaparecidas, para sancionar a los responsables ni tampoco para brindar reparaciones. (106)

victims of enforced disappearance do not trust the justice system, or the public ministries, or the police or the armed forces; Impunity is a chronic and present pattern in cases of enforced disappearances, and sufficient efforts have not been made to determine the fate or the whereabouts of missing persons, [so as] to punish those responsible or to provide reparations.

As discussed previously, the unprecedented increase in narco violence in Mexico and the dominance of crime syndicates within the public sphere, in combination with a sense of impunity for the violations committed, aided by the allegations of corruption at the heart of local and national government, have all contributed toward shaping the nation's sociopolitical landscape almost beyond recognition. Adding to this fact, the high number of enforced disappearances in Mexico has fueled a climate of fear, which in turn has fed the sense of insecurity and lack of safety, of which Huezo speaks in the opening quote to this chapter. Inviting comparisons to be made with the southern cone's experiences of kidnap, torture and disappearance conducted during the Argentine military Junta, and also

following Augusto Pinochet's *coup d'état* in Chile, respectively, Mexico, at the time of writing, continues to grapple with the complexities and consequences of targeted abductions, unmarked mass graves and the statuses of "unknown" in relation to thousands of officially reported victims of the conflict. Referred to in the media as "*levantones*," the crime of kidnapping in Mexico has reached unprecedented levels, impacting the sense of national stability and instilling a sense of terror and uncertainty in the victims' families, who in turn are condemned to a prolonged and undefined state of mourning.

LEVANTONES

En México la palabra levantón tiene una connotación semejante a lo que en Argentina se conoce como desaparición forzada. Al levantón suele seguirlo una muerte. Es un secuestro por el que no necesariamente se pide rescate: inmigrantes, turistas, empresarios, campesinos y narcos o policías asesinados en ajustes de cuentas engrosan las estadísticas de este delito en un país militarizado. (Veiga 2011)

In Mexico the word 'levantón' has a connotation similar to what in Argentina is known as a forced disappearance. The snatching is usually followed by a death. It is a kidnapping for which rescue is not necessarily requested: immigrants, tourists, businessmen, peasants and drug traffickers or police officers are killed in the settling of scores that swell the statistics of such a crime in a militarized country.

Perhaps the case that encapsulates the sentiment of public indignation (at the sense of impunity enjoyed by many of the criminals who carry out the enforced abductions) is that of the forty-three missing students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School, located in the city of Iguala in Guerrero. This case has caught media attention both nationally and internationally, and has come to exemplify the failed rhetoric of economic prosperity and a lack of handling on national security that the first year of the PRI's return to power attempted to relay. Enrique Peña Nieto's first year and a half in office was dominated by a PR campaign that announced economic growth and heralded a new era spearheaded by the newly sworn-in president. Evidence of this can be seen in Peña Nieto's early 2014 appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine accompanied by a story that announced him as the leader of what many termed as the economic "Aztec tiger" proclaiming the president as responsible for "saving Mexico" (Berggruen and Gardels 2013; Hapak 2014). However, that same image of a

proud-looking young president would soon become debunked when many on social media platforms took to satirizing the *Time* magazine cover replacing the same with an adjusted image of Peña Nieto as the Grim Reaper, complete with the tagline "Slaying Mexico." In that same year, only several months later, the scandal of the forty-three disappeared Ayotzinapa students would confirm criticisms that Mexico continued to struggle with narco-related instability, and institutional corruption, despite the efforts of the Peña Nieto PR campaign which had worked hard to prove the contrary.

On September 26, 2014, according to official reports, the forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School had taken several buses to travel to Mexico City to commemorate the anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre. During their journey, local police intercepted the buses which contained more than ninety students on board and a confrontation ensued. Several students were able to escape, and forty-three of them were detained by the police. Details of what happened during and after the clash remain unclear, but the official investigation concluded that once the forty-three students were in custody, they were handed over to the local *Guerreros Unidos* (United Warriors) crime syndicate and allegedly murdered. Furthermore, Mexican newspapers reported that Iguala's mayor at the time, José Luis Abarca Velázquez, and his wife María de los Ángeles Piñeda Villa had masterminded the abduction in an effort to avoid discrediting Piñeda Villa's candidacy. On the night of the disappearance, Abarca Velázquez had organized a gathering of colleagues and supporters, at an event that was aimed to launch Piñeda Villa's bid for the mayor's role unofficially. The couple, it is alleged, were concerned with the possibility of unruly disruption to their celebrations, caused by the student protestors. According to media reports, on September 26 upon hearing of the student buses' movement northbound, and fearing their imminent arrival, Abarca ordered the police to intercept the *normalistas'* journey and to halt their progress. This led to an altercation when the police encountered the student buses, giving way to a violent clash with the armed police firing at the student passengers, which resulted in five dead, several wounded and forty-three captured and taken into custody. The whereabouts of the forty-three detainees remained unknown, and the students were not seen since.

The crime of the forty-three disappeared provoked a wave of mass demonstrations galvanizing members of the public beyond the affected areas of Guerrero, who united to protest against the perceived government

impunity, and the rise in mass abduction and enforced disappearances, all of which have become common place in recent years. Furthermore, the hashtag #Ayotzinapa has since gathered momentum over the past years, attracting media attention and criticism for Enrique Peña Nieto's government and its official response to the crimes. It was reported that Peña Nieto's administration took more than ten days to acknowledge the incident and to offer condolences to the families of the disappeared. A visit made by the president in 2016 to the city of Iguala for the first time, two years after the actual event, was seen as an attempt to rectify the mishandling of the tragedy on behalf of the PRI administration (AP 2016). Furthermore, the Ayotzinapa case has highlighted a significant flaw in the institutional position against organized crime, and in particular the authorities' response to the increasing levels of mass kidnappings and disappearances. The proclamations of governmental corruption, and the sense of indignation at the unprecedented levels of insecurity and crime in Mexico, have witnessed the rise in large-scale demonstrations on the nation's streets alongside the emergence of protest *caravanas* (rallies) (such as those coordinated by the families of the missing forty-three), which in turn have ventured beyond national frontiers and into the United States, gathering support and highlighting their plight during their journeys. Echoing the protest movement instigated by aforementioned Javier Sicilia, following the kidnapping and killing of his son, which became known as the *Movimiento Por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity) (and also saw the coordination of a Peace Caravan that traveled north and into the United States), the #Ayotzinapa demonstrations and media coverage highlight the growing discontent felt by the public, in particular the politicization of grief enacted by the families of the victims. United by their sense of loss and indignation at the lack of investigative progress made on their cases, families of the victims have turned to social media platforms to voice their protests and have formed collective groups that seek to bring to justice those responsible for the crimes committed against their loved ones, such as the *Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México* (Movement for Our Disappeared) (MNDM), the *Campana Nacional Contra la Desaparición Forzada en México* (National Campaign Against Enforced Disappearance in Mexico), *Grupo Guerrero de Reacción Inmediata de Desaparecidos* (Guerrero Group for Immediate Reaction of the Disappeared), *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (For the Return of Our Daughters Home) and *Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México* (United Forces for Our Disappeared in

Mexico) (Fundem), among many others. Perhaps most crucially of all, the families of the victims seek to unveil the truth behind what happened to their next of kin, which in turn would allow for closure of the cycle of grief and would offer them the space to mourn their loss finally, once confirmed.

In Huezo's documentary, the protagonist, Lourdes, reflects on her current condition of perpetual mourning. She describes herself as being in an in-between emotional space, where she is unable to move onto alternate stages of grief and thus process the loss of her loved ones, because, as she puts it, she lacks their physical bodies to mourn. Each death, however harrowing, is accompanied by various stages of mourning, which assist in the processing of the traumatic experience of losing a loved one. Societal rituals such as funeral ceremonies aid in the visualization and performance of loss and allow for the processing of grief to take place. However, when there is a lack of a body or corpse to confirm the death, the sufferer is left with a sense of emotional vacuum, and the process of mourning is problematized. In *Ausencias*, Lourdes speaks of how she has been able to mourn the death of her father, who passed away several years ago, and how his funeral and subsequent gravestone allowed her the space to grieve and to process her loss. However, in her current condition Lourdes is deprived of this process and is unable to grieve the physical loss of her husband and son, and yet the small sense of hope due to the lack of confirmation of their deaths keeps her in waiting for their return. The memorialization of the deceased, furthermore, in the form of tombstones and graveyards allows for the demarcation of a life once lived, and offers the mourner the space for reflection and recognition of their loved one's presence, albeit posthumously. As María Soledad García (2002) observes:

Los epitafios, las placas, las lápidas y los panteones se establecen como señales de la muerte para quien visita y recuerda (más allá del vacío y ausencia que deviene con la muerte). El cementerio, y particularmente la sepultura, proporcionan el reconocimiento del cuerpo, y en consecuencia, de la muerte. Pero ¿qué sucede si no hay cuerpo? ¿Qué sucede si no hay marca de vida en la muerte? (12)

Epitaphs, plaques, tombstones and pantheons are established as signs of death for those who visit and remember (beyond the emptiness and absence that comes with death). The cemetery, and particularly the grave, provide recognition of the body, and consequently, of death. But what happens if there is no body? What happens if there is no mark of life in death?

What happens when there is no body to grieve, as Soledad García queries above, is a profound state of prolonged mourning that maintains the sufferer in an almost pathological condition of melancholy. In his essay on “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud (1963) posits that the process of mourning after the loss and death of a loved one is comparable to the phenomenon of melancholia/depression. In his analysis, Freud explains that both conditions share a similar outward effect on the subject due to their similar environmental influences. Furthermore, the inhibition of the ego, and the disinterest displayed in relation to the external world is manifest in both conditions of mourning and melancholia in equal measure. However, despite their apparent similarities, both melancholia and mourning remain fundamentally different responses to loss. During the grieving process, normal grief eventually eases when the sufferer emotionally detaches from the lost person or object and replaces sorrow with other emotions. If this process fails to evolve, however, severe depression may develop, which can manifest itself in self-destructive tendencies. Furthermore, within the condition of mourning, Freud observes that the sufferer deals with the grief of losing a specific love object in the conscious mind. In melancholia, however, a person grieves for a loss that they are unable to comprehend fully or identify, and thus the process takes place in the unconscious mind. The act of mourning, therefore, is considered a healthy and natural process of grieving a loss, while melancholia on the other hand, is considered a potentially pathological condition. Furthermore, Freud observes that melancholia develops when the feelings of sorrow are inappropriate to the context, gradually becoming internalized. This process leads to the melancholic subject identifying with the lost object or loved one on an unconscious level, paving the way for a process that according to Freud, leads to the loss of ego. Therefore, despite their similarities, there are fundamental differences between the two conditions whereby mourning is recognized as a healthy and normal process following the loss of a loved one, while melancholia is considered an abnormal pathology with links to suicidal tendencies that may require clinical intervention.

Thus, the lack of a body or a corpse in the case of the thousands of disappeared (and presumed dead) victims of the so-called *levantones* in Mexico problematizes the process of grief for the families affected by loss, reducing them to a state of emotional limbo, unable to grieve fully, yet clinging onto the uncertain hope of their loved ones’ return. This continued sense of hope paradoxically prolongs the condition of mourning in

the sufferer, exacerbating the notion of absence of those who have been lost. As Soledad García (2002) notes, the non-forgetting of those who have been disappeared, undertaken by those who lie in wait for the return of their loved ones, condemns the sufferer to what she terms as “un duelo eterno” (an eternal [state] of mourning):

No olvidar reclama la desaparición como estrategia de continua espera y continua muerte. Convivir entre la memoria y el olvido quizá sea el único duelo eterno que podamos realizar ante el cuerpo desaparecido. (13)

Not forgetting the claim of disappearance as a strategy of continuous waiting and continuous death. Living between memory and oblivion may be the only eternal grieving we can perform before the missing body.

Therefore, those who are left to deal with the aftereffects of the *levantón* are condemned to exist within this state of emotional in-betweenness, positioned within the sites of memory and forgetting. As Soledad García's abovementioned suggestion confirms, this emotional in-between space is where the sufferer is placed when confronted with the reality of a disappeared body, a lack of physical body and a lack of body of proof (of death). Such a stall within the processing of grief, aided by the lack of corporeality to grieve, paves the way for the victims' families to remain in a state of profound depression, unable to mourn in a healthy way, and running the risk of developing the condition of melancholia in the sufferer. These states of emotional in-betweenness, of profound despair and of the engulfing sense of absence, are aspects that drive the narrative of *Ausencias*, where Huezo sets out to explore how the impacted family members cope with this loss and sense of absence as exemplified by Lourdes' story. Commenting on filmic responses to the cases of disappearances in Argentina, Paula Rodríguez (2006) notes a commonality between the spaces of memory, the traumatized condition and the all-pervasive sense of the past in the present where she suggests that:

Los filmes sobre la desaparición de personas se reconocen por un pasado que no cesa. Este vaivén entre dos tiempos obedece a lo propio de los acontecimientos de extrema violencia, a lo traumático de las situaciones límite y también a la condición de la desaparición forzada como una de estas situaciones. (174)

Films about the disappearance of people are characterised by a past that never ceases. This swing between two times is due to the very events of

extreme violence, to the traumatic of borderline situations and also to the condition of enforced disappearance as one of these situations.

And it is this process of attempting to make sense of the trauma, and its meanings for the present that we see as the crux of Lourdes' internal journey, as she reflects on her personal history while continuing to explore the labyrinths of memory, a process that Rodríguez names as a form of "memoria airada" (irate memory) involving "una estrategia de transmisión de lo traumático a la memoria" (a transmission strategy of the traumatic to memory) (173). This type of memory remains pivotal to an understanding of collective traumas because "[l]a memoria airada es una forma de representación cultural. Se trata de una estrategia de inscripción de lo traumático en la producción cultural y en las prácticas filmicas" (irate memory is a form of cultural representation. It is a strategy that involves the inscription of the traumatic into cultural production and film practices) (177) and maintains, therefore, a dialogic relationship with its context of production. In terms of the use of *memoria airada* in the shaping of filmic narratives, Rodríguez comments that "la memoria airada: por un lado, [contiene] la reelaboración del pasado realizada desde el presente, atisbos de rememoración y del trabajo de recuerdo. El otro aspecto que coexiste es el núcleo de la memoria airada, la memoria identificada con la querella que se diferencia de la rememoración" (irate memory: on the one hand, [contains] the reworking of the past made from the present, [providing] glimpses of remembrance and the workings of memory. [Whilst] the other aspect within which it coexists is [found] at the core of irate memory, a memory identified with the grievance which differs from the recollection) (177), thereby primarily maintaining the function of reevaluating the past from the position of the present. Reading *Ausencias* within the spectrum of a revisitation of the past through the use of memory and language conducted in the present, as Rodríguez's example above suggests, reveals a process that relies on the use of the image as playing a crucial role in the processing of a personal trauma, seen in the home movies and photographs displayed in the documentary. This notion in itself provides Huezo's film with layers of meaning that work mimetically with the context of their making, reflecting a much wider problematic and national condition.

AUSENCIAS

Twenty-six minutes long, the film *Ausencias* explores Lourdes' emotional world now inhabited without the presence of her husband Esteban and younger son, Brandon. The camera is often positioned to one side, from below, or focused on another object as Lourdes speaks in a voice that tries hard to distance itself from its own presence. The film opens with the display of a series of home movies, containing scenes of family gatherings, birthday parties and afternoons spent in the park. The first sounds we hear are that of children laughing, set against a blank screen; we then see our first image, of Dayana as a small girl, speaking to an off-screen character who is possibly her father. Dayana is Lourdes and Esteban's eldest child, and the sister to the disappeared Brandon. Images of smiling children, proud parents and family harmony fall into sequence. These opening scenes reveal family video recordings and discuss the process of taking family photographs. The film therefore starts off with home movies of the children with their parents, each taking it in turn to pose in front of the camera. First in this collection is an image of Lourdes standing with her children by her side, yet before we even see her physically on the screen, we hear her voice as she asks her husband to "take the photo." We then see a younger, smiling Lourdes with each of her children on either side, posing for the camera. In this opening scene, Lourdes gives Esteban instructions as to how to best focus the lens, and which angle is better suited for a photograph. This commentary on how to take a photograph is accidentally being video recorded by Esteban's camera, and rather than focusing on the preparation for taking the snapshot, Esteban is actually recording the event. These sequences capturing a moment of taking family portraits compels us to remember Walter Benjamin's observations that within the imprints of time that result from the snapshot taken by a camera, these involve "the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like, the 'snapping' of the photographer has [...] the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera [gives] the moment a posthumous shock, as it were" (Benjamin 1992a [1939], 171).

Thus, the process of taking a family portrait is highlighted within the film's opening narrative discourse and is an important point that I shall return to in my analysis below. Once Lourdes begins her tale, we realize that these family portraits are all that remain as traces of a past family life, once the father and son have disappeared. The family pose for a framed

moment in front of the camera, and the grainy, colorful and warm-textured images almost contrast with the current-day scenes that portray a stark change in reality to Lourdes' existence. Next we view a family gathering for Brandon's birthday, which is filmed by the father figure, Esteban. Here Lourdes is framed next to her son, lavishing him with loving gestures and smiles. And it is at this point that the film's voice-over can be heard for the first time, with Lourdes' introduction to her son Brandon where she refers to him as her "clone." This early statement made by Lourdes will be the first of several instances during the voice-over narration where she will refer to herself in the third person, as if demonstrating temporary emotional detachment from the images of the past and the anguish of her ordeal in the present time frame. Furthermore, the birthday home movie scene is where we learn of the mother's difficult pregnancy with Brandon, due to the dangers it posed for her health having fallen pregnant so soon after her previous caesarean.

During the next home movie of the film's opening sequence, we are invited to observe an intimate moment of relaxation shared between a father and his two children. In this scene, all three are lying down, the camera is being held above the three characters, and at a slight angle. Both children are embracing their father and Dayana is talking about how she plans to stay with her parents forever, even when both she and Brandon are old. The scene is a touching portrayal of family connivance and the joy shared by both parents reveling in the company of their young children. This is the only scene where the camera frames Esteban close-up, who is shown to be quietly smiling at his daughter's words, and glances occasionally over at the camera. The scene marks a poignant moment in the film when viewed retrospectively, since we later learn of his disappearance, making these home movies touching testimonials to a life once lived. In the home movies, Lourdes' voice (as filmmaker of this segment of the home movie) is overrun by the reflexive voice-over presence of the current, recollecting and sorrowful Lourdes, as we go on to view in the scenes that follow.

In the first scene of the documentary set in the present day, and which is placed directly after the family home movies, spectators are transported to a dark, solitary room with what looks like an empty bed at the center of the frame. There is silence, apart from the sound of a dripping tap heard in the background. The movement under the covers acts as a self-reflexive method whereby the spectator is reminded of the voyeuristic tendencies of the camera. It feels odd and intrusive to be watching somebody sleeping

alone in their room. However, the reasons behind the filming of this scene remain unclear. One explanation could be that its role is that of providing a contrast with the previous family-filled home movies we have just viewed. Aesthetically, the ambience has changed, and we are presented with gray, black and blue hues that visually frame the scene in a dreary contrasting color palette that disconnects from the warm grainy textures of the home movies just viewed. At first, it seems that what we are viewing in this scene is simply an empty bed, except for the sudden stirring of a body lying underneath the covers which swiftly changes this interpretation. This sleeping body turns out to be Lourdes herself, who is alone, and in an empty, cold-looking room. We notice she's wearing warm clothes in bed (a red sweater) and the room is predominantly dark with the only light emanating from the reflections on the wall by the early morning sun. The aesthetic choice of colors in this scene gives the setting a cold, almost prisonlike feel, which aims to visualize externally the sense of emotional isolation and despair felt by the protagonist. Such bleak images are juxtaposed with establishing shots of the early morning sun reflected onto the leaves of a tree outside, which rhythmically sway with the wind and catches the sunlight flickering on and off its surfaces. Then the *mise-en-scène* reveals the close-up shot of a woman's pair of feet, featuring painted toenails resting on a carpet floor. The camera here lingers in a static position, partly to reveal that the protagonist has risen from her slumber, and partly to introduce us to the main female subject of the film.

Lourdes in this scene cuts a solitary figure in the room, empty of possessions apart from the bed. There is an indication that the emotional imprisonment that Lourdes currently finds herself in is mimetically conveyed by her surroundings. Her first words in this scene—the first uttered in the present context of the narrative—are “la ausencia te duele” (absence hurts), reflecting on the film's title and thematic focus. Thus, the first scene with Lourdes in the present time frame is a reflection on absence and loss. She describes the experience as a type of “silence” that has arrived and remained. Accordingly, this scene is shot in silence, apart from her voice-over. From this moment onward the spectator becomes aware of a triadic structure to Lourdes' characterization in the documentary. We have the Lulú (Lourdes) of the past home movies, where a carefree and smiling young woman is presented and is surrounded by her family. By contrast we have the present Lourdes, who is the main subject of the documentary's narrative, and who invites us into her current world of uncertainty, loss and pain. And third we have Lourdes/Lulú's voice-over,

which acts as a bodiless presence throughout the narrative linking the past with the present events and invites the spectator to share in her inner turmoil. These vocal interactions reflect on the events of the past, and their traumatic effect for the present, alongside her current journey of unending grief, reminding us of Soledad García's observation in relation to the families of the disappeared as being one of "eternal mourning." The separation of perspectives also provides a certain distance from the narrator Lourdes with the protagonist Lourdes, on whom the former reflects, and refers to in the third person, often naming her Lulú, as if she were an alter ego.

Returning to the home movies shown at the beginning of the film, it is easy to see how these recordings, which contain images of the family taking snapshots, are significant since they highlight the photograph's crucial role as both pictorial testimonies which constitute performances of memory, and as palpable, visible relics of the past. Family photographs and family albums in particular, adhere to the construction of what Annette Kuhn (2007) refers to as "repositories of memory." These visual repositories of memories frame our understanding of what is no longer physically present, in the documentary's current time frame, and are crucial for our engagement with the film's exploration of the notion of absence. At this point in my discussions, we are reminded of Barthes' (1993) observations on the relationship between death and the photographic image, previously explored in more detail in Chap. 6, whereby the traces of mortality present in the photograph are accentuated due to the absence now prevailing in the present. As the author observes, every "photograph is a certificate of presence" (87), and in the case of Lourdes' experiences of loss, a confirmation of an existence. Although the Acosta family's disappearance comes without the confirmation of their demise, their prolonged physical absence arouses a sense of continued mourning, as we observed above, much in the manner of a recent death. In his *Camera Lucida*, Barthes discloses what he sees as photography's primary role, in that the photograph "does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (85). Watching these home movies within the documentary, and observing the discussions taking place of how to take a photograph, in addition to the final framing of the film with an image of a smiling Brandon at the end, emphasizes the importance of photography for recording, preserving and also maintaining a sense of confirmation of a life once lived, an existence that has taken place. Moreover, photographs work in conjunction with a notion of memory in that they act as testimonies of the past,

but, in addition, can reconfigure understandings of a cultural context and setting. Furthermore, the use of family photographs for interpreting the past takes on the form of a visual palimpsest that offers possible historical readings. These insights provide new layers of meaning when applied to the case of the missing victims of Mexico's drug wars. In this context, photographs are used and displayed publicly by the families of the victims as visual emblems of their loved one's disappearance, as memorials, and as markers of protest revisualizing those who have become invisible. Such collective spectral images of the disappeared subject return to haunt the public imaginary and challenge the official discourse on the context of violence in Mexico. What is more, they do so in a manner that resists forgetting, and brings to the fore the importance of the family album for articulating notions of memory and cultural awareness, as Kuhn (2007) observes:

Personal and family photographs figure importantly in cultural memory, and memory work with photographs offers a particularly productive route to understanding the social and cultural uses and instrumentalities of memory. (283)

Furthermore, what links both set of films intertextually, that is, the home movies and Huezo's documentary, is the fundamental role that memory plays in guiding the viewer. The use of memory as a narrative vehicle is assisted in the film through the concept of the family photographs and home movies, as well as Lourdes' own recollections of the events that led to the disappearance of her loved ones. The physical presence of both Esteban and Brandon in these opening images, therefore, reinforces the idea of their current physical absence in the present day, and alludes to what Paula Rodríguez (2006) sees as a process that engages "*imágenes [con que] se muestra la ausencia que se transforma en metonimias del trauma*" (images [with which] absence is shown are transformed into trauma metonyms) (173). In her article on the work of Argentine filmmaker Lita Stantic, and in particular the notion of latent trauma in films about the enforced disappearances during Argentina's Dirty War, Rodríguez explores the relationship between trauma, memory and representation. The type of memory manifestation that she identifies, namely the aforementioned *memoria airada* constitutes "*una forma subjetivada de la memoria colectiva sobre lo traumático*" (a subjective form of collective memory concerned with the traumatic) (171), and in her analysis the

author examines how this use of memory frames the filmic discourse of Stantic's *Un muro de silencio* (A Wall of silence) (2006). Stantic's first film observes the traumatic expressions of Argentina's military Junta's illegal crimes pressed upon the individual (and the national psyche), which included among other reports the torture and enforced disappearances of thousands of civilians. These past events have shaped the *memoria airada* of Argentina's Dirty Wars and its casualties. What is more, Rodríguez suggests that this type of memory that is existent within the wider collective, however, remains repressed and not fully explored:

consideramos la memoria airada como una forma de la memoria atribuida a un colectivo social que supone olvidos y silencios, así como las huellas del registro de lo imaginario que no están plenamente integradas al orden simbólico. (175)

we consider irate memory as a form of memory attributed to a social collective that involves forgetfulness and silence, such as traces of registering the imaginary that are not fully integrated into the symbolic order.

Furthermore, the Argentinian example of the enforced disappearances during the military Junta's reign of terror, and the nation's filmic responses to the processing of this national trauma on the screen is a case that can be used comparatively when attempting to read current Mexico's ongoing crisis. Films about the enforced disappearances, the struggle to find justice and the impact of military and narco violence on society are finding their way onto the screen in Mexico, and in particular are on the increase within the documentary genre. Such films focus on the topic of violence and enforced disappearances from both sides of the border, such as Natalia Almada's *El velador* (The Night Watchman) (2011), Luis Ramírez Guzmán y Federico Mastrogiovanni's *Ni vivos ni muertos* (Neither Dead Nor Alive) (2014), Matías Gueilburt's *Antes que nos olviden* (Before They Forget Us) (2014), Katya Adler's *Mexico's Drug War* (2010) and Matthew Heineman's *Cartel Land* (2015), to name but a few.

Perhaps applicable to our readings of the opening sequence of Huezos's *Ausencias* is the suggestion made by Rodríguez that the role of images in the creation of a sense of *memoria airada* is crucial, and the transference of these concepts, of image-making, collective memory and national traumas onto the screen is one that can provide challenges for the filmmaker because

La memoria airada es una forma de representación cultural. Se trata de una estrategia de inscripción de lo traumático en la producción cultural y en las prácticas fílmicas. En la memoria airada hay una concepción de la ira que no está vinculada sólo al trabajo de duelo, también contiene el encriptamiento propio de lo traumático, procedimientos, huellas y elementos prenarrativos, subjetivados en la producción fílmica. (177)

Irate memory is a form of cultural representation. It is a strategy for the inscription of the traumatic in cultural productions and film practices. In irate memory there is a conception of anger that is not only linked to the work of grief, but it also contains its own encryption of the traumatic, procedures, traces and pre narrative elements, subjectivized in film production.

And in the case of *Ausencias*, Huezo's challenges lie in how to emulate such deep emotions of loss and mourning by visual means. How does the filmmaker share the protagonist's inner world and re-create that sense of absence around which Lourdes' life revolves? One of the fundamental obstacles in representing the disappeared is their lack of physical presence, and the conveyance of a sense of absence, because, as Bill Nichols (1987) observes,

Documentary film operates in literal compliance with the writ of *habeas corpus*. "You should have the body" -without it the legal process comes to a standstill. "You should have the body"—without it the documentary tradition lacks its primary referent, the real social actor(s) of whose historical engagement it speaks. (9)

This lack of physicality, as Nichols posits, is replaced by photographs, home movies, testimonies and witness accounts, forming an overall picture of the disappeared. Using a close reading of the documentary, *Roses in December* (dir. Ana Carrigan and Bernard Stone 1982), which traces the life and disappearance of Jean Donovan in El Salvador, through archival news footage, interviews, home movies and diary readings, Nichols ponders on the problems that arise from attempting to represent the disappeared subject. Although focusing mainly on Donovan's story, *Roses in December* also tells the story of the three nuns who were with Donovan at the time of her demise, and who were also murdered by a government death squad in El Salvador. In terms of the film's subject matter, Nichols observes that the "film does offer, however, an exemplary demonstration of how the human body can be represented through a weave of materials that stand in for a person who is dead" (10). And it is these materials, seen

in the form of photographs, home movies, snapshots and diaries, that ultimately piece together an understanding of this missing “character” in the film *Roses*. This same reading of *Roses* and of the missing subject can also be applied to *Ausencias*, where the re-creations of both Esteban and in particular Brandon come about through the piecing together of pictorial and verbal materials that describe, visualize and re-create the lost subjects. Furthermore, given the structure of the documentary, that begins and ends with a photographic image, and the narrator’s reliance on the role of memory to document and reveal the events of the past, in addition to its nonlinear narrative sequel, it is also possible to view *Ausencias* in its entirety as constituting what Kuhn (2010) classifies as a “memory text.” In terms of structural characteristics, the author observes that in memory texts:

time rarely comes across as continuous or sequential: for example, events may have a repetitive or cyclical quality (‘we used to...’), or may telescope or merge into one another in the telling so that a single recounted memory might fuse together a series of possibly separate events, or follow no obviously logical or temporal sequence. The memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, ‘snapshots’ and flashes that can generate a feeling of synchrony: remembered events seem to be outside any linear time frame or may refuse to be easily anchored to ‘historical’ time. In the memory text, events often appear to have been plucked at random from a paradigm of memories and assembled in a mode of narration in which causality is not, if apparent at all, a prominent feature. (299)

The structural processes of *Ausencias* that rely on the use of memory and memory materials (such as home movies and photographs) to narrate the events of the past, and reveal the condition of the present, align the documentary with the characteristics of the memory text as Kuhn describes above. Furthermore, this narrative fluidity, with timeless sequences and intermixing imagery with voice-over reflections, assign *Ausencias* with a poetic quality that encourages the viewer to engage visually with the image being framed, and emotionally with the verbal narration. The mimetic interactions between the contents of the voice-over’s narration alongside the aesthetic dimension to the film, seen in the camera’s fascination with forms, light, shadows, colors, textures and sounds, illustrate the performative aspect of the film’s quality. Furthermore, *Ausencia* delivers what Kuhn

notes to be a main feature of the memory text containing “abrupt shifts of scene and / or narrative viewpoint,” because

memory texts have more in common with poetry than with classical narrative. In the memory text [...] structure and organization seem to be of greater rhetorical salience than content. The metaphoric quality, the foregrounding of formal devices, the tendency to rapid shifts of setting or point of view all feed into the characteristically collagist, fragmentary, timeless [...] quality of the memory text, which by and large possesses an imagistic quality [...] Significantly, all of these attributes have to do with performance: the memory text embodies a particular approach to, or type of, performances of memory. (299)

As we shall see below, it is at the point when Lourdes begins to delve into her memory and recollect the traumatic moment when Esteban and Brandon went missing that the film aesthetically changes. At this point in the narrative, the diegetic and extra-diegetic soundscapes become more oppressive, audibly engulfing her words and mimicking her despair in an attempt to represent the inexpressive pain of a mother's loss.

REPRESENTING THE INEXPRESSIBLE

In the scene that follows the opening shots of Lourdes asleep in her room and set after the sequences of home movies have occurred, we view Lourdes positioned in front of the camera with her back turned to the spectator. She is on the phone, and at first it is not clear who Lourdes is speaking to (Fig. 8.2).

It soon becomes apparent, however, that Lourdes is in the process of leaving a voicemail for an unknown recipient. Later we learn that her absent husband's cell phone is still active, which she keeps topped up with credit. This enables Lourdes to make these daily phone calls to an unknown potential listener at the other end, who she hopes may take pity on her pleas and grant her the return of her son and husband. This is the only point in the narrative in which we see a distinct and palpable vulnerability in Lourdes, as her voice cracks at the mentioning of Brandon's name while she leaves her daily message. We witness her silently weeping, away from the camera's focus, while imploring her son's invisible abductors to let him go. Due to the polite, restrained and courteous manner in which Lourdes speaks on the phone, at first it seems as though she is speaking to a



Fig. 8.2 Lulú on the phone in a scene from *Ausencias* (2015)

government bureaucrat or an official investigating the case of her missing husband and son. It is therefore all the more poignant and tragically powerful to learn that Lourdes is in fact leaving a voicemail for his kidnappers, in the belief that one day she may appeal to the better nature of those who have taken her son and husband away from her. This daily ritual paradoxically restores a sense of order and control over a situation that has become in Lourdes' words "a living nightmare." It also demonstrates the extent of Lourdes' unreserved hope in finding her loved ones again, and for their safe return. And perhaps more importantly, it shows Lourdes' belief in the inner goodness of people, since with her messages she attempts to tap into the paternal instincts of the kidnappers and arouse a sense of parental empathy of shared experience. Her final words to them, "I need my son so that I can live," summarize what Huezo had observed in Lourdes when she first began interviewing her as a potential documentary subject. Huezo has stated of Lourdes' voice as containing a haunting quality, which, when speaking to her, came across as if her subject were only half living.

The camera in this scene then focuses on the blank walls as Lourdes begins to tell us her story, which, she informs us, began four years prior to the making of the film. We learn of how Esteban, her in-laws, Walberto and Gerardo (both brothers to Esteban), and son Brandon set off one morning en route to Monterrey Airport to see one of the brothers off back to Los Angeles, where he then lived. The party of four left at 6:50

am, with Esteban promising to return by midday since he had to be at work by 1 pm. While Lourdes relates these details, the camera focuses on bare derelict walls and on puddles of water that are confined in the room and which constitute bleak, damp, unwelcoming exterior visuals. As the story of Esteban and his family members' kidnapping becomes more emotive and harrowing, the external visuals of the walls darken, the cracks on the surfaces are heightened and framed, insects are traced as they crawl up one wall's surface, a rusty nail is framed, an orifice resembling a bullet hole is focused on and the general lighting of the room darkens considerably. These filming techniques remind us of Kuhn's observations made above on the poetic value of the memory text, in that the images in these scenes act as a form of visual pathetic fallacy, with their increasing bleakness and dark compositions mirroring the depths of despair felt by the protagonist as she recalls her experiences of the days immediately following the abduction.

Lourdes continues to inform the spectator that at 4 pm Walberto's wife had phoned to say that her husband had not arrived at the airport in Los Angeles. They were told that out of the eighty-two passengers all but one boarded the plane from Monterrey to Los Angeles that morning. As the narrative/voice-over progresses, the imagery on the wall worsens. The rising damp is framed as visually engulfing the wall, the painting is shown to be peeling, the images are of rotten and cold matter, and the wall looks stained and dilapidated. At this point Lourdes reveals the extent of her anxiety on the day of their disappearance as escalating when they make their way to the authorities to declare Esteban and his party as missing. As she recalls, when they arrive at the district attorney's office, the weather turns cold and gray, and then it begins to rain heavily, revealing a connection between her inner turmoil and her environment. As if to accentuate this emotion, the camera frames a close-up of a deep crack in the wall and an unfilled, dark hole. These symbolic images constitute an externalization of Lourdes' emotional universe, which has been shattered by the sudden loss of her husband and son. These same explorations, moreover, conducted by the camera of a decaying exterior wall, serve as a visual exercise in the filmic approximation to the traumatic experience. The ordeal suffered by the protagonist in turn is externalized and visually relayed through the camera's framing of matter, object and texture. The element of light plays a major role in the documentary in that the dancing shadows on the wall that we saw earlier turn to darkness, while the oppressive tones of the color palette heighten the sense of anxiety and powerlessness felt by the

protagonist as she fears the worst for her loved ones. Thus, in these scenes each image changes and worsens mimetically with Lourdes' words as she describes her ordeal, and equally the soundscape matches this uncertainty and sense of danger as we hear the chattering of people, distant planes flying overheard, footsteps, doors closing and the distant sound of gunshots, all sounds that do not directly correspond with the dark images being framed, but are present to provide a sense of foreboding, confusion and despair.

As if by way of contrast as the narrative progresses, the imagery brightens, and we view Lourdes venturing outside of the dreary interiors, stepping into daylight and the outside world. We see how social activity continues to take place outside of the family home, where Lourdes' solitary figure is framed against a busy, cosmopolitan cityscape. In these scenes, she is either driving her car in an overcrowded road, sitting quietly contemplating the world outside from a café window, or standing watching a group of young boys, roughly her son's age, as they gather in the park chattering among themselves. These scenes serve to remind us of how the everyday, and the mundane, continues, and how despite the tragedy inflicted on the family, life goes on. In these scenes, Lourdes is deliberately shot as an outside observer, her moments in the car reflect her constant search for her loved ones, and we are told how the fleeting view of a similar car to the one her husband was driving on the day of the abduction sets her heart racing and alerts her mind. Her sense of hope and longing is resolute, and she sees the possibility of reunion at each street turning. When we finally see Dayana (Lourdes' eldest child) again, she is almost a young woman, on the cusp of adulthood. We see her continuing her passion for swimming (mentioned by the voice-over at the beginning of the film), and we witness the close bond between mother and daughter (Fig. 8.3).

Lourdes' voice-over reveals the tumultuous feelings of guilt, love and gratitude for her daughter. During the dark days following her husband and son's disappearance, Lourdes abandoned herself to her feelings of despair and entered a state of profound depression. She confesses to being unaware of her daughter's needs and neglectful of her duty as her mother. Once again Lourdes' voice cracks under the strain of her remorse, and she confesses that she will never forgive herself for temporarily forgetting her daughter. Then one day, we are told, the sunlight shone through the window and its reflection was caught on Dayana's face, and it was at this point, Lourdes' voice-over recollects, that she understood that the little

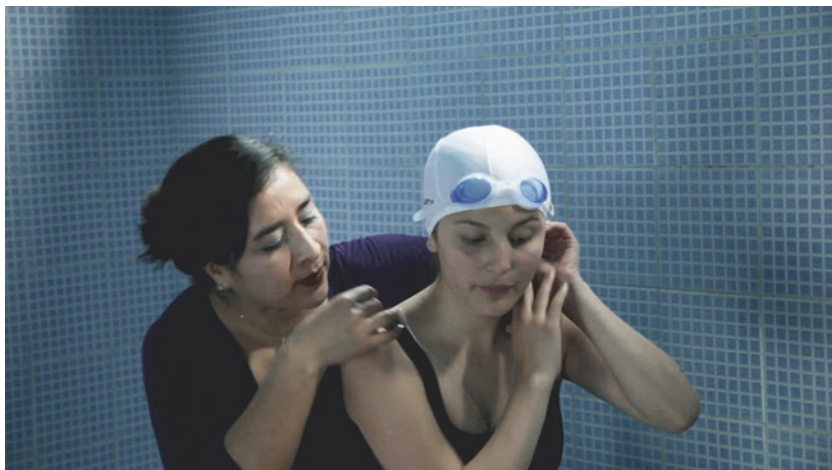


Fig. 8.3 Lulú and her daughter, Dayana, in one of the final scenes of the film. Still from *Ausencias* (2015)

girl was her reason for living. At this point in the narrative, and as if to mimic Lourdes' memory, Dayana is framed bathed in sunlight, as she smiles while waiting for her turn to dive into the swimming pool. Thus, the past memory as narrated by Lourdes' voice-over and the present are brought together under one similar image. The contrast between the darker moments of the film, the bleakness of the abandoned rooms and derelict walls are replaced by sunlight, the chatter of children by the pool and an image of a proud Lourdes watching on as her daughter swims lengths in the water. The film ends on this note, and the last character we see is Dayana leaving the pool and walking away from the camera. These sunlit instances bring a sense of relief to the trauma and frame the ending of the film with a notion of hope. Hope that Lourdes may find some peace and solace in her daughter. Hope that Dayana may grow up to become a commendable young woman, scarred by the events of the past, but strong and secure in the care of her mother. However, the profound sadness provoked by Lourdes' story lingers long after the closing credits have ceased. But despite this, Huezo's choice to end the narrative in the present day, with a brightly lit ambience and a more serene Lourdes watchful of her daughter's achievements, provides a sense of hope, as far as is possible given the context of uncertainty. This sense of hope in the film's ending in

turn mirrors the hopeful position maintained by the thousands of families of these victims of *levantones*. Families who lie in waiting for their loved ones to return, and who, until then, continue to campaign nationally and internationally. These families of the victims of violence in Mexico, whose loved ones have been taken from them, work hard to make sure that the disappeared are not forgotten, that they remain visible despite their disappearance. Key to this concept is the role that the photograph plays in this process of resistance, and, in particular, the centrality of the family portrait within the struggle for visibility and accountability. Thus, the idea of the immortality of the image is encapsulated in the closing frame of the film, which ends with a photograph of a smiling Brandon.

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Conclusion

Throughout this book we have observed the differing articulations of violence as explored in a selection of recent films from Mexico. Although not constituting an exhaustive study of all the manifestations of violence on the screen in Mexico during the period analyzed, the films discussed in this book have been carefully selected as examples of recent filmmaking tendencies that engage with the context of their production. In this study, I have acknowledged the significant developments within the field of Mexican film studies, and the current discursive topics within scholarly analysis regarding the transnational tendencies of Mexican cinema (Shaw 2013, Tierney 2018, Sánchez Prado 2014), the crisis of the national (Sánchez Prado 2014) and the increased commercial viability and international appeal of films from Mexico (MacLaird 2013). Despite these observations, however, the intellectual enquiry in this book has remained focused on how the screen has been used as a representative tool for expressing social anxieties, which include, among others, the growing levels of violence from the last twenty years. The analyses in this study, therefore, have focused on the connection between social instability and a recent cinematic vision that has been shaped by the context of its making. The last twenty-five years in Mexico, as we have seen, have been some of the most turbulent and politically unstable in decades, and this book traces how these manifestations of instability have been visualized on the national screen. I acknowledge also the prevalent success of other film genres, such as the romantic comedy and melodrama, that have also prospered over the

last couple of decades; however, my interest in this book has remained in scrutinizing how filmmaking in Mexico has coped with the increasing levels of violence. How have directors turned to address these instabilities on the screen? How has the artistic impetus been driven by the startling growth in urban conflict and kidnapping which has seen Mexican lives affected on a daily basis over the last two *sexenios*? These preoccupations remained at the heart of my examinations, which began with an analysis of one of the key events of 1994, a year that marked a shifting point in the trajectory of national politics, and, to some extent, paved the way for contemporary political discourse in domestic filmmaking. Accordingly, Chap. 2 of this book explored the dynamics of power as demarcated by the rural conflict between a guerilla presence in the southern region of Chiapas and the military, following the 1994 EZLN uprising. The lack of significant fictional representation of the EZLN in Mexican filmmaking has been highlighted in my discussions as a curious lacuna within recent filmic production, and thereby the significance of *Corazón del tiempo* (2009) has been emphasized in this book for a number of important reasons. As the first feature film to attempt to address an alternative type of reality on the screen, seen in the daily life of an autonomous Zapatista village, and framed within the romantic film genre, which depicts a story of forbidden love between a young villager and a Zapatista fighter, Alberto Cortés' film marks a turning point in the recognition of alternative depictions of subalternity on the screen. Steering clear of exoticizing a rebel group that for many years captured the imagination of dissidents and far-left ideological movements across the globe, *Corazón del tiempo* turns its attention to the quotidian existence within a Zapatista reality. In his film, Cortés explores a Zapatista world that entails the everyday struggle for economic survival, manual work and the peaceful protest against an increasing military presence in Mexico's rural spaces. Furthermore, *Corazón del tiempo* shows the integrity of a community that is living on the fringes of hegemonic neoliberal power structures, but yet exists at the heart of a developing political discourse that embraces ideological alterities. These aspects of Zapatista communal living can be seen, for example, in the film's exploration of the importance of women's rights within the rebel villages, the close ties maintained between community members and the Zapatista fighters in the jungle, and the coordination of daily farming rituals with the establishment of a democratic process that is aimed at strengthening autonomy and political agency.

The need to address the rebellious nature of those on the fringes of centralized political discourse in Mexico is taken further with the depiction of a fictional struggle for autonomy and survival in the midst of an increasing militarized bucolic space, as explored in Francisco Vargas' first film, *El violín* (2006). Aesthetically engaging and thematically concerned with the alliances between music and resistance, contextualized within the indigenous territories in Mexico, *El violín* addresses the negative impact of military presence on the *campesino* subject and the effects of social and political exclusion as experienced by the nation's indigenous communities. Ahistorical in nature, the representation of the rebel leaders, and some of the connections made between the protagonists' cultural heritage and the naming of characters in *El violín*, pays homage to both Guerrero's guerilla past from the 1970s and the more recent EZLN uprising in Chiapas. Vargas' film, also explored in Chap. 2, speaks of a rich mythological past that lies interwoven with a tradition of indigenous resistance. A sense of hope for a better future, alongside the acknowledgment of the community's strength of spirit, demands the spectators' attention in the film. Despite *El violín*'s bleak outcome at the end, I have argued, the children survive to continue the musical tradition of their forefathers and, crucially, to continue the armed struggle, exemplified in the image of a young, now-orphaned Lucio walking into the distance with both a guitar and a pistol hanging from his shoulder. The book's next chapter continued its investigations into the significant year 1994, exploring its meanings for the present. In Chap. 3, my analysis focused on Carlos Bolado's feature film about the assassination of presidential candidate for the PRI, Luis Donaldo Colosio, who was killed while at a campaign rally held in Tijuana on March 23, 1994. As we saw, this chapter details the contradictory reports, conspiracy theories and political scandals caused by the assassination, where my examinations outlined the film's complex engagement with important issues from the historical moment of the assassination, which in turn finds resonance with contemporary Mexico's concerns with the political ruling class. Bolado's choice of genre, narrative structure and aesthetic preference all combine to provide a multilayered interpretation of the causes and imperatives behind the assassination, to ultimately reach the same conclusion regarding the culprit. The issue of political corruption, a topic discussed in several chapters of this book, continues to be addressed in the second film analyzed in Chap. 3, seen in Jorge Ramírez Suárez's *Conejo en la luna* (2004), a fictional exploration of the systemic venality and overall impunity existent at the core of the nation's political elite. The sense of

mistrust toward the Mexican political system, its institutions and the governing classes is a theme that runs consistently throughout this book and perhaps culminates in the chapters that deal with the so-called Mexican drug crisis. Leaving behind criticisms of the PRI seen in Chaps. 2 and 3, Chaps. 4 and 5 focus exclusively on the effects of Felipe Calderón's so-called war on drugs and its representation in two very different films. Chapter 4 took as its exploratory premise the analysis of Luis Estrada's dark comedy, *El infierno* (2010), a film made as part of the bicentenary celebrations and which through its stark criticism of the state and the critical condition of the nation engulfed by narco violence, ideologically proclaims, as does its tagline, that there is "nada que celebrar" (nothing to celebrate). This early representation of the narco-problem in Mexico depicted through the comedic lens falls into contrast with Chap. 5's interpretation of the same social problem, seen in Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013), which is a bleak, somber reminder of the effects of the narco war on its victims. Through a detailed analysis of Escalante's micro-depiction of the continued horrors of the conflict brought about by the so-called war on drugs, Chap. 5 delves into the meanings exposed by *Heli*'s relentless camerawork that refuses to look away and forces the spectator to share in the protagonists' experience of violence, death and despair. The theme of war is continued in Chap. 6 of this book, where the transnational success stories of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón feature as the blueprints from where to explore Mexican cinema's presence in Europe. The role of the Spanish Civil War and its effects for the present generation is analyzed in González Iñárritu's feature *Bintiful* (2010), a film that is set in contemporary Spain, and reveals a nation that is shaped by the traumas of the past Civil War, falling vulnerable to modern-day global capitalist power structures which determine socioeconomic stabilities. The hauntings of the past are explored more thematically and generically in del Toro's work, where the effects of war are again examined from the point of view of the victim, only this time embodied in the figure of a small boy. The future of Europe is brought into question in Cuarón's dystopian vision of a barren, unstable United Kingdom, at conflict with itself and with the rest of the world, fearful of invasion and governed as a police state. In Chap. 6 the themes of corruption and ideological Armageddon are explored in Cuarón's film, where the topic of political resistance amidst a context of exploitation within subaltern spaces, firstly examined in Chap. 2, is returned to once again in *Children of Men* (2006), drawing parallels between the past and present

Mexican experience of guerilla warfare, with an imagined European condition of social disintegration and rebellion.

The effects of war, its meanings for those who live through it and for those touched by its violence are examined in Chaps. 7 and 8. The last two chapters in this book share a concern with the effects and processes of grief upon the individual, and the resultant trauma of displacement and warfare. Chapter 7 turns its attention to the multi-directed and inter-generic film, *Aro Tolbukhin: En la mente del asesino* (*Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer*) (2002), a film that pieces together the emotional, psychological and criminal condition of an enigmatic character named Aro Tolbukhin. Transnational in nature, *En la mente* draws together some of the observations of transatlantic cinematic links explored in Chap. 6 with the works of del Toro, González iñárritu and Cuarón. In Chap. 7, I examined how *En la mente del asesino*'s multidimensional character ventures onto new narrative terrain, employing a variety of filmic methods and texts, while exploring the effects of loss, displacement and trauma upon the individual mind. The effects of trauma on the individual and, more specifically, the experiences of maternal grief are further analyzed in Chap. 8 where the focus turned on Tatiana Huezo's short documentary, *Ausencias* (2015), a film that reflects on the difficulties of living with loss, and the results of violent conflict on the family unit. Sharing a similar concern with the role of the victim that we saw in Chap. 5 with Escalante's *Heli*, which included the inefficiencies of local government, the ever-pervading sense of impunity for crimes committed and the psychological scars caused by the drug war, in Chap. 8 Huezo's observational camera invites us to share in the documentary's main subject, Lourdes' story, which mimetically takes on the role of constituting a wider reflection on a national problematic. The sense of loss, the emotional turmoil and the anguish that is felt following an enforced disappearance is the main thematic focus of Huezo's work, a topic she returns to in her follow-up feature documentary, *Tempestad* (2016). Huezo's film questions the effects of bereavement on those whose family members have been made to disappear and explores the emotional universe of maternal grief in the context of *levantones* in Mexico. An increasingly traumatic reality in Mexico, enforced disappearances at the time of writing continue to be on the rise, with the discovery of mass graves dominating headlines at home and abroad. The search for loved ones, the longing for their return and the nostalgia for a past when they were present are mimetically observed in Huezo's film.

Although seemingly different in narrative style, focus and year of making, all the films in this study have been brought together because they have something to say regarding the nature of violence in contemporary Mexico. Many of the films analyzed in this book explore armed conflict and its repercussions, whether the warfare be guerrilla, urban or narco related. We have also seen how directors in Mexico have chosen to examine political corruption and the role it has played in shaping current-day Mexican socioeconomic instabilities. Films such as *Heli* and *Ausencias*, for example, focus on the effects of such violence as seen at micro level, represented in the form of a family member of the disappeared and those living in the “war zones” of the narco conflict. Although disparate in terms of genres, narrative methodology, place and time of making, the films in this book share a sense of indignation and a desire to use the camera as a way of denouncing such violence and its effects on society. As the production and international success of films by Mexican directors continue, so too, it seems, will the interpretations of both national and international realities as they are shaped by global discourses of economy, politics and social conflict.

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